

Well, I Do Have a Vocation

Craig A. Eddy



Book 2 of
Lords of Terror and Abuse

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by
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Chapter 1

Investigation Goes National (Saturday morning)

"Mister President, thank you for seeing me on such short notice," the Senator said. "I don't know whether or not you've been keeping up with the news, but a man ran into some sort of wall at that foreign Embassy out West, and was blown up. Mind you, this wall wasn't inside the Embassy, but was, in fact, outside in the parking lot. Regardless, the foreign nationals grabbed the investigation of the incident, and have blown it into a terrorist activity without a shred of evidence to back their claim. They also refuse to turn over documents they obtained, possibly illegally, to a Senate committee for our investigation."

"Hmm. Well," said the President, "let's see if I've got the details right. A man entered private property – specifically the grounds of the Envoy Enclave near Phoenix, Arizona. Property owned and controlled by the Leaders of Home, in accordance with the treaty we have with Home. Is that the incident that you were talking about?"

"Harrumph. I believe that is the case."

"And he hit some sort of wall with his car which, by the way, was loaded with explosives connected to a cell phone detonator. Is that right?" asked the President.

"I was not made aware of any explosives or detonator," the Senator replied.

"Really? Then how were you made aware of the incident?" In a corner of the Oval Office – now THERE'S an oxymoron – a woman in a gray suit tried very hard to keep from snickering.

"I really couldn't say," said the Senator.

"I really must insist," said the President. "A serious act of terrorism was enacted against a world that has a treaty with us. That it was an act of terrorism is not in doubt, due to information we have received. That it was performed by an American citizen makes it particularly touchy at this time. So, unless you want to be investigated as a potential collaborator in a terrorist attack, I suggest that you tell me where you got YOUR information. And why you would believe such vague suppositions without getting firm evidence."

"Sir, I'm sorry, but I'm not allowed to reveal my sources," the Senator said, visibly deflating.

"I, too, am sorry. But as of this moment you are a 'person of interest' in this case. And, as it occurred on Home property, it is rightfully their investigation and jurisdiction. You will be taken from here to the American Envoy Enclave Embassy, there to answer questions to their satisfaction. I seriously suggest that you reevaluate your decision between now and then, as

I understand that Ambassador Muriel takes a very dim view of people who try high-handed or bullying tactics, especially those directed at her. Melanie, if you would be so kind?"

"Yes, sir, Mister President," she replied, quietly, and stood the Senator up on his feet.

"You can't do this! This is illegal! I insist that you let me see my lawyer!" the Senator sputtered.

"Actually, Senator," Melanie said, "this is perfectly legal, and you don't need a lawyer. You are not being charged with a crime. You are simply being asked to assist with the investigation. The very fact that you got some information concerning this case places you in the position of knowing where that information came from. As a good American, it's your responsibility to disclose that information in an effort to help apprehend the perpetrators of such a crime." She translated him to Muriel's office.

"In addition, Senator, you may receive further details that will help you understand the situation," Melanie concluded.

"Good morning, Senator. Please, take a seat. Would you like some coffee, tea, soda, milk?" asked Muriel, pleasantly.

"What is this? Where am I?"

"This is the Envoy Enclave in Arizona, Senator. My name is Muriel. I understand that you have some information concerning an event that happened here. An event that is not widely known or publicized. I want to know where you got your information."

"And if I refuse to tell you?" he asked.

"Then, sir, we will have to consider you a co-conspirator in the event, and take such action as we deem necessary to secure that information. I should warn you, you are NOT in America at this time. This property is under the jurisdiction of Home, and abides by Home rules, which allows us much more latitude in investigating criminal activity than your country does. Oh, not torture. Nothing like that. But we do have our means of procuring information," Muriel said.

"I demand an attorney. I know my rights," he said.

"Here, sir, you have no rights as long as you are behaving in a manner that can be construed to aid criminal activity. I repeat, sir. This property does not follow the laws of America. People, here, don't need lawyers to defend them because they respect the truth and are helpful. They also own up to mistakes they make, and seek to rectify them. I think, maybe, you have made such a mistake. And I'm here to help you rectify it. If there is some danger in it – well, I've dealt with danger before, myself, and I can assure you that I can see to your protection far better than any normal person in America can."

"You don't know these people. You don't know what they're like," he said.

“On the contrary. I do know what they're like. They are people that would try to blow up every Ambassador of Home that they know about, all at the same time and all using the same methods. Every Embassy Enclave was attacked, not just this one. And the detonations were triggered by one man, on a fishing boat in the Atlantic, outside the normal continental limit. He triggered it by uploading a web page that contained a signal that cell phones received. And those cell phones were the detonators,” Muriel said. “So, unless you can help us find out who it was that actually masterminded this crime of attempted murder, you will have to be held in protective custody until they are found and brought to justice.”

“You don't understand! They PAID me to ask questions about the incident. They'd kill my family if they knew I was here,” he said.

“Melanie?”

“Working on it, Muriel. I've got a squad bringing them in, right now. They'll be in the Guest House in a moment.”

“Good. Tell the manager to make sure there's enough room for the Senator, too. As of now, he's in protective custody of the Embassy of Home, by order of the Leader of Home. Senator, I'm going to ask Melanie to take you to Guest House, to see where you'll be staying, and make sure that your family is safe and unharmed. It's a short walk, but in the Arizona heat and you not used to it, I suggest that an air conditioned golf cart be used. It will be at the door in a moment.”

“Incoming,” Mata said, loudly. “Six missiles.”

“Track back,” said Muriel.

“Gulf of California. Presumably from a small warship. Checking. Got it. Small warship, heading out. Envoys in route to intercept. Where would you like it?”

“Would it fit in our waste land?” asked Muriel.

“Probably, but it would disrupt tests that Jeff is holding.”

“Standby,” Muriel said. “::Jeff, clear the wasteland. We've got a ship full of dangerous people coming in::”

“::Roger, Muriel. Evacuating the area. Two minutes::”

“::Affirmative, two minutes. Thanks::”

“OK, Mata, tell the Envoys to hold for ten minutes, then translate it in. Do they have the image? And who's taking out the missiles?”

“They have the image, and maintenance has the missiles. Squad two picked them up

and defused them before bringing them in. Muriel, Arabic script.”

“I figured that, Mata, but thanks for the information. Oh, have the Envoys in Guest House check for trackers,” Muriel said.

Mata laughed. “You think I don't know my job, sprout? They already checked, but they couldn't get a lock on where the signal went to. Oh, and the Senator has one, too.”

“Mine,” Melanie said. “I'll get one of my boys to come find it.”

“OK,” said Muriel, “But I bet I know where he'll find it. Senator, did you receive any gifts, lately?”

“Well, yes, a wristwatch. My boys did, too,” he said.

“But not your wife. Typical. OK, Melanie, have him sweep, though, in case there's more than one.”

“Hmm. I hadn't thought of that. Not normal trade-craft,” Melanie said.

“Well, they're not normal people,” Muriel replied. “In any case, Senator, the golf cart is here, and will take you to your family. I would appreciate it if you'd come back here after you've assured yourself of their safety and comfort. In the mean time, I'll be seeing to the disposition of the ship and it's crew when it's translated in.”

“Young lady, are you trying to pull a fast one on me? I won't believe that you didn't have something already in place that you were trying to fob off on me as the real thing unless I see it arrive.”

“Good point. OK. Which would you prefer to do first, then, Senator,” asked Muriel.

“What I would like isn't the point. I must see the ship come in.”

“You will. But I can have the Envoys simply track it and wait for our signal to make the translation. So, that can wait until after you've seen your family, if you like,” Muriel said.

“Won't that throw things off for you?”

“It needn't. The ship has no idea that it's being tracked. And they won't know until they set down here that there's been any observation of them, or that anything's wrong. The shock of hitting the ground hard enough to put an impression in it that will hold it stable and upright will be the first indication that they're no longer at sea,” Muriel said. “Look, there's a third way we can do this, if you're game. I'll take you to see your family, so you'll know they're safe. I'll take you by translation, to save time. Once you know they're safe and NOT hostages or prisoners, we'll translate to where the ship will come in, and I'll have the Envoys bring it in. There's going to be some scrambling at that time to make sure that they can't shoot at us or set off any explosives or something. Following that, I'll prove that the ship is, in fact, on our

property by taking the golf cart back to my office, and from there to Guest House, so you'll know that I haven't pulled a fast on on you. Would that be acceptable?"

"Yes, I think so. It certainly appears that you're going to a lot of trouble to prove to me that what I'll be seeing isn't something fabricated to suit your purposes," he said, grudgingly. "But it raises the question of why you would go to that trouble."

"Simple. I'd rather have your understanding and cooperation than have to go to the trouble of digging the information out of you, and possibly having to press charges against you through the Federal government," Muriel said, bluntly. "I've had to make enemies, in the past. Well, to be more precise, they made enemies of themselves and nothing I could have done would have changed that. You, however, have been the victim of miss-information. Bluntly, you've been lied to. And I think that once you see that, you'll be more inclined to at least listen to me."

"Very well, how does this translation or what ever you call it work?"

"Simple. I build an image, then check it against reality. Then we'll walk into the image-which-is-reality and we'll be there. It's how we used to train our trainees in translating the first few times. And, I think, for you peace of mind that we'll translate to a place that's been photographed and on television a number of times, and is close to Guest House – the area in front of it is close to the main gate." Muriel took the Senator outside and started constructing the image, and turning it into reality. They could see around them, the activities going on and any possibility of their conflicting with other people or things. Then she simply had him step forward with her, into the image-which-is-reality, and they were there.

Muriel gave him an opportunity to look around and verify that it was, in fact, just inside the main gate and in front of the Guest House, then led him inside to the registration desk. "The room number for the Senator's family, please?" she asked the Envoy on duty.

"Yes, ma'am. Number 406. We put them in the President's suite. They've got four Envoys with them to help them settle in and see to their needs," the Envoy replied. "And welcome to Guest House, Senator."

"This isn't going to make you short in other areas, is it?" asked Muriel.

"Not at all," the Envoy replied. "The manager called in replacements for them when he understood the seriousness of the situation and what would be needed. Melanie's squad member was very good at explaining the situation."

"OK, thanks. And thank the manager for me, too. I will, myself, as soon as things settle down, but I'd appreciate you letting him know that I said so," she said.

"Easily done," the Envoy said, and Muriel led the Senator to the elevators.

"You could have done the same thing taking me to the room, couldn't you?" asked the Senator, as they went up.

“Yes. But then you would have lost the continuity. And this is important to you. As it is, you will lose continuity for the next trip, because we'll translate directly to the wasteland to see the ship come in. However, we'll regain it on the way back, if you can be patient with me for that long,” Muriel said, smiling.

As they approached the door, it opened and Fran stood there. “Fran? What are you doing here?” asked Muriel.

“Minor boggle. The Senator's wife was stressed from the translation and not knowing what was happening. It's straightened out, now, though. She's been filled in on where she is and why, and that her husband will be right here,” Fran said, as the Senator brushed past her and hurried to his wife. “You're babying him, Muriel,”

“I know. I think I can turn him into a friend, but it takes work,” Muriel replied.

“It always does,” Fran said. “And more so when they're suspicious to begin with. Well, good luck. I need to make the rounds to see if there's any other excitement going on.” And she translated out.

As she walked into the living room of the suite, she saw two men and a woman gathered around the Senator. One of the men spotted her and nudged the other, whispered something to him, then walked toward her. “You're her, aren't you? The woman that's supposed to be the leader of some foreign country?” he asked.

“I'm Muriel, the Leader of Home and Ambassador to earth,” she replied, wondering where this was going.

“Are you one of them?”

“If you mean, am I an Envoy, then no. I'm human,” she replied.

“So, if you're human, how come they follow you?”

“Because I happen to be going in a direction that they feel is good – that goes the way they want to go,” she said.

“And what is that direction?”

“I'm getting people trained in Envoy techniques, providing people with information about Home and the Envoys, and trying to clean up some of the problems that the people of earth have by dealing with some of the bullies that are only out for themselves and don't care what happens to regular people,” she said.

“And you do all that?”

“I have a lot of help,” Muriel said, grinning.

"Well, that still doesn't tell me why people from another world would follow a human girl," he said.

"Oh, sorry. It's because humans are the children of Envoys. Envoys have no body. They're just soul. Or, if you don't like that term, try intelligent power. Humans are soul in a body," Muriel said, and immediately realized she'd made a mistake. The boy started shaking, then collapsed on the floor. Muriel cushioned his fall and hollered for Fran.

"Shock," Fran said. "Atypical. Wait – it's contact shock! He's connected! What . . .," she looked inquiringly at Muriel, who sent her a fast record of the conversation. "Oh, my. Muriel, these are happening more and more. And this is the first time I've seen the connection made on such a slim bit of information. But it's a full connection."

"We've got to find out the circumstances for why and how it's happening. There must be something in individual lives that is bringing them that close to breakthrough," Muriel said. "If this happens 'in the wild' there will be all sorts of miss-information about it, and people thinking that the victims are possessed, or insane, or something," Muriel said.

"I'll get my squad started on it," Fran said. "They can pass it back to home, if they need to."

"Thanks, Fran. Sorry about pulling you out, like that."

"I wasn't doing anything important. And this is. He's coming out of it, now. He should be fine and back to his normal self in a second. But he's going to need to go through the abbreviated training as soon as possible, to bring it all back, Muriel. Call Don. I know for fact that he's not doing anything, right now." Muriel looked at her quizzically, and Fran just looked back, innocently. Which, of course, told Muriel volumes, and she smiled, gently.

"I'll do that, then."

"No need," Don said, from behind her. "I was following Fran, so I know what happened. My squad and I can take care of him."

"Sorry, Don," Muriel said.

"Muriel, you never holler for help unless it's important. And this is. Twice. Once because you didn't know what happened, and the second because of the connection. So don't worry about it," he said, grinning.

"Then I'll leave it to you. Thanks, Don." Muriel got up and went over to the rest of the family. "Sorry about the excitement," she said. "Your son was apparently close to making a connection. The same connection that Envoy trained people have. Something I said must have triggered it, and I've got people looking into that, and whether it can happen without some sort of trigger. He'll need to go through some familiarization with what he's connected to, now, but it isn't long or strenuous. Then, he'll be back to his old self, but with some new

abilities.”

Chapter 2

The Investigation Gets Personal (Saturday morning, later)

"You're sure he will be all right?" asked the Senator.

"Perfectly all right," Muriel replied. "Don's the best trainer we've got. He's pulled people through REALLY tough situations and had them functioning within a day. He's beyond good. No, your son is in very good hands. And his girlfriend's a doctor. In fact, you've met her, Fran. So, if there's any physical problems they'll be taken care of immediately. Now, I think it's time for us to take a trip to the wasteland and take care of that ship. Can I ask you a question?"

"Yes, well, I suppose I deserve that after all the questions I've asked you," he said with a chuckle.

"There is a way that I can show you what I'm doing, but it can result in a headache. I can counter that, but I'd need your permission for both sides of it. What I can do is force a one way link to your mind, so you could see what's in mine. No, I wouldn't be seeing what's in yours. I said it was one way. But people that can't access the power that we can – well, it can hurt. I can counter that by putting a temporary connection to power to you. But if you'd rather not"

"And I'd be able to see how you do this translation thing?" he asked.

"Yes."

"OK, then do it." And she did, applying the power first to offset the mental shock he'd undergo when she forced the link. Suddenly, his mind was filled with mental sends flying back and forth between the head of maintenance, Jeff, and the leader of squad three that was following the ship. He could even SEE the ship, on the water, steaming for all it's worth toward access to the open ocean. He could see the area of the wasteland where it would be placed, including the strangely shaped pit that looked almost like the impression of a ship's hull. He never noticed the translation between the President's suite in Guest House and the wasteland. Just, suddenly he was there. Then, so was the ship – dropped in from ten feet in the air, to solidly fit the pit that had been dug.

::Muriel, we immobilized the crew to keep them from being injured in the translation and fall. Can we get another squad up here to secure weapons before we let them free?: the Senator heard in his head.

::On it,:: came another mental voice, and a squad popped in from nowhere, though from Muriel's mind he caught an almost echo that they'd been in her office, and that the last send had been from her security chief, Mata.

After that, it was a constant flow of orders and actions as Muriel saw them. The crew, secured so they couldn't move, were brought out and placed on the ground, standing. And the Senator 'saw' through Muriel's mind as the ammunition was rendered inoperable, and the guns secured. Then the first squad was literally flying around the ship, searching for hidden compartments and records, the ship's log and the captain's orders. That this was a war ship, although a small one and rather old, was obvious to the Senator. Everything was happening so fast that it was hard to get more than impression of the events. Finally a couple of commands from Muriel had the various records sent to her office, and the crew sent to a warehouse prison in side Enclave. The captain of the ship, though, was sent to her office under guard.

"How are you doing, Senator?" Muriel asked.

"No headache. Was that really what you see and hear?"

"Oh, yes. Sorry if it got a bit intense, there. There was a lot going on and a lot to coordinate. My squads are pretty much used to this sort of work, and really don't need my supervision. But I wanted to be sure that we got as much preliminary information as possible before I started questioning the captain. Would you like to go back to your family? Or would you rather stay connected to me and see how we do it?" Muriel asked.

"You'd let me watch you interrogate him?"

"Actually you'd get to see it from my mind, and point of view. You might understand, because of that, why we can get more information than your best intelligence groups can. None of it would be legal under US law, by the way. But, remember that we're operating under Home rule, not US law. Do you understand?" asked Muriel as a golf cart rolled up to them.

"You're saying that, in a sense, I'm in a different country," the Senator said, as he took his place in the cart, and they started out for Muriel's office.

"Definitely in a different country. We own the property, under the procedures of your country. But the treaty we set up with the government makes it plain that the jurisdiction is that of Home. That jurisdiction, by the way, extends for the whole property, not just the Enclave. So, it includes the parking lot. If you haven't seen a copy of the treaty, I'll make sure you have one before we leave my office," Muriel said.

"You talk like you expect us to stay," he said.

"Senator, it would be best. The crisis isn't over. And you and your family are still targets. Here, you're protected to the absolute best that we can provide. You won't be able to claim it as a travel expense, though, since this isn't costing you anything."

"So, I'm your prisoner?" he asked.

“Not even close. You're a guest, and are and will be treated that way. Guests automatically get room and board free. Also clothing as necessary. You can go anywhere in Enclave, see something that you like and want, and it will be given to you. Go to any restaurant and eat free, and the manager of the restaurant will bend over backwards to be sure that you're happy. And that goes for your family, too,” Muriel said. “In fact, say the magic words, and you could consider this like a sanctuary.”

“Magic words? What do you mean?” he asked.

“By asking for sanctuary you obligate us to provide protection for you and your family, even against your own government. NOBODY can force you to leave the protection of Home. That's been tested a few times, and never been broken. That's the formality. In actuality you've been under that kind of protection since you came here. Oh, SHOOT!” Muriel said. “Clothing. You and your family came away without any extra!”

“It's covered, Muriel,” Mata said as they entered her office. “We had the tailors up there as soon as the family arrived, and they'll be back to fit the Senator when you finally turn the poor guy loose.” The last was added with a grin.

“Thanks, Mata.”

“You defer to her?” asked the Senator.

“No more than I defer to her, Senator,” said Mata. “She's like that – polite and appreciative of everybody. Unless they cross her, that is. She's been that way since she came here, four years ago. It's part of the reason that she was made an Ambassador, then a Leader of Home. Becoming THE Leader of Home was something different, though. She made a target of herself, without realizing it, and when that happened she went for the source of the problem. She instigated a number of sweeps that landed a lot of people all over the world in jail. It was that 'take charge' attitude and her need to have hard evidence on anyone she brought in that caused the leadership to change from Ted to her.”

“I don't understand,” said the Senator.

“Oh, she went after people that were manipulating the public through businesses politics, and religions,” Mata said. “Mainly, because they had gone after her. Sometimes violently. She worked both ways from whatever link she had, and got enough evidence as she went along to roll up the entire group, including the leaders. Then Ted added his expertise and bought up a bunch of businesses, pulled them private, and put them under the head of Envoy Enclave Enterprises – what we call Triple E – and put her in charge. And that brought another rash of attacks on her – her doing – and she found out who was manipulating Congress to legislate in favor of businesses to the detriment of the citizens of the country. Banks, certain businesses and utilities, things like that.”

“And, along with that,” Muriel added, “I managed to train bunches of people. Military and police agencies, mostly, but we do get some civilians, too.”

“And now my son.”

“And now your son, but he's because he was close to breakthrough, anyway. Well, let's interrogate the Captain. You still want to keep the connection to me? This could be a bit rough.”

“I think I should. You say your methods wouldn't pass the US laws. What do you do?” he asked.

“There are several ways we can do it. The worst is that I go in and literally search his mind. Recently, though, we've found a cleaner, safer way of doing it. I simply go in long enough to ensure that he will tell the truth, and only the truth. It's not hypnosis, so it's not subject to the problems of hypnosis – of the interrogator influencing the person, and getting them to tell what he thinks the interrogator wants to hear,” Muriel said. “It's legal under Home rule. And, for that matter, under US law and the treaty, as long as the US asks us for assistance in investigating a matter. As this is purely a Home situation, though, US law doesn't come into play.”

“Now I begin to understand why you're leading the investigation. OK, I'm game,” he said, and Muriel led him to her casual area. In his mind, the Senator watched Muriel peg a meter to the 'truth' side as she took her seat.

“Now, Captain, I want to know who you are, where you're from, and why you were stationed in the Gulf of California. I also want to know your orders, and who gave them to you,” Muriel said. And it started. Names, locations, people, everything. It all came pouring out in one massive, relatively coherent spiel. The Senator was obviously shocked by the amount of information. He was also shocked at how far up the political structure the connections went. When the Captain finally stopped, Muriel thanked him and told him that he'd be held until arrangements could be made to return him and his crew to his country, then she unpegged his mind and turned him over to an Envoy to take to his cell.

Muriel then released the connection to the Senator's mind, and checked to be sure that there was no residual pain left behind. When she was sure of that, she released the link to power that had supported him. Chuck brought in coffee for the two of them, already in mugs and made up to taste, as well as a pot and the milk and sugar to make up more.

“Senator? Are you all right?” asked Muriel.

“So much. So fast. I should let the President know.”

“Not necessary. On two counts. First is that it doesn't really touch on America. Yet. And second because as a matter of course a record is being sent to him. Well, actually to Melanie. But since she's heading so much of the intelligence work, it amounts to the same thing,” Muriel said. “Come to think of it, though, those missiles had to have passed through American air space to reach us. That might be enough to bring America into the investigation. If so, they'll let me know.”

The still stunned Senator looked at her, his eyes wide. "Is it always like this for you? How do you stand it?"

"Well, no, it's not always like this. For the most part, I'm just a normal girl. But when things happen I kinda go into overdrive. As for standing it, well, it's kinda exhilarating. And it's a challenge to get enough information to make a complete roll-up. This one is a bit scarier, though. It looks like it may lead all the way to the top of their politics," Muriel said. "I really don't want to have to take over another country. Not this soon after China became an Enclave."

"Can you do that?"

"We did it. We were attacked, and it traced back to China. The Regiment of Home went in and destroyed the military capability of the country, then Chun went in and offered the government the opportunity to surrender to Home. They refused. They died. And China became an Enclave. It was just made official in Russia," Muriel said.

"You say that so casually," the Senator said, almost as an accusation.

"Nope. Not casual. Just shortened to what was necessary to describe it. It leaves out the panic that having nuclear missiles fired at us caused. It also leaves out the scramble to protect the people of China from invasion with the loss of their military, and protect surrounding countries from the invasion of hordes of Chinese fleeing an unstable situation. And then, of course, there was our stumbling over Chun, and her being trained, and our setting her up as an Ambassador. Lots of stuff involved in that. And of course there was the mass training that went on, so that by the time Chun went back about seventy five percent of the population was trained. That's what made it possible for us to declare that it was now property of Home and under Home control."

"You're going to do that with America, too, aren't you," the Senator said.

"What? Oh, hell no. First, the situation here is entirely different. In countries headed by a dictatorship all the corruption ends up going to the top. In America, it's more diffuse and harder to get at. And, we have nowhere near the percentage of the population necessary to end up taking over by fiat. On top of that, America is pretty well cleaning itself up as we go along. Oh, there may be some time in the future where the population decides that they want to go under Home rule. But I don't see it happening in my lifetime," Muriel said.

"Then why? If you're not trying to take over countries, why are you doing this?" asked the Senator.

"The people," Muriel replied. "Right now, people are tied to expensive housing, insurance, medical bills, utility bills, food, clothing, stuff like that. The everyday expenses that everyone faces and nobody takes into account when they talk about inflation. Everyone but the trained. With the training, and maybe sometimes a bit of help, all of that becomes free. A trained person can make his or her own cloths and food, and secure their house, stabilize it and make it safer. They can create their own power supply and take themselves off the utility

grid, as well as water and sewage. They can travel anywhere, instantaneously. Envoy trained doctors – and by that I mean those trained in Envoy style medicine – can cure anything that we've seen so far. Communication becomes easy when you can just make a link to someone, no matter where in the world they are, and talk to them. Oh, there's lots of benefits to the training. Ask your son when you get back to Guest House. He'll tell you all about it. He should be through with the formalities by now. And there's nothing secret about it, really. Just not understandable to most normal people.”

“So, where does that leave us, that don't take the training?” asked the Senator.

“Oh, you'd still be cared for, There will always be jobs to do, so you can always earn a living. Or the support of friends and relatives that have taken the training,” Muriel said. “It's working in China, already. We do it on a somewhat reduced scale, here in Enclave. We have people that don't have the training as employees, and they get the same benefits as those that are trained or those that are guests. And, eventually there won't be any people that don't have the training.”

“I'm afraid I still don't understand. You brought me here to find out where I got my information. You have the capability of getting it whether I want to give it to you or not. Yet you spend your time showing me around, rescuing my family, showing me how you do things instead of just going in and getting what you want. Why?”

“Senator,” Muriel said. “There are differences between people. Some people are dead set against us. Others are merely confused as to who we are and what we are. These have the possibility of becoming friends, or at least friendly. You're in that second class of people. Somebody has fed you bad information in an attempt to manipulate you. Then, when you came to Enclave, they felt that they were being caught out, and moved to 'remove the evidence' of what they'd done. I really hate to simply use friends. I'd much rather spend the time trying to convince them that we're NOT the enemy. There's always other ways to get information if I absolutely have to.”

“A threat?”

“Nope. Not even an insinuation. We may have enough through what we got off the Captain to roll up the source of this infestation. No,” Muriel said, “if you're unwilling to help us then you put us in an awkward position. Eventually, we'd have to let you return to your normal life. Oh, we'd assign an Envoy or Envoys to you and your family, but it's not the same type of protection you have here. And the bad guys might not all get rolled up in the net. So, they'd still be out there. Oh, you'd be welcome to stay, but I don't see you as the type to walk away from a job because somebody's threatened you. So, let us help you find that someone before they do somebody harm. You can't be the only one they've threatened.”

“How do you know that I was fed bad information?”

“Oh, that one's easy,” Muriel said. “You knew a little about an incident that happened here, but were told that it happened on US soil. It didn't. The parking lot is part of the Embassy, as you'd have known if you'd read the treaty. OH! Treaty. I was going to give you

a copy.” She pulled one out of a 'no pocket' and handed it to him, and his eyes bugged out. “Now, you knew garbled bits of what happened here, slanted to make it look like we'd killed someone without any provocation. In fact, there were twenty one incidents, all at the same time and all staged the same way. And we didn't cause the explosion, we simply contained it. In fact, if we'd had the time, we would have rescued the driver. Assuming that he wanted to be rescued.”

“You also didn't know that the President knew about the incident. We hadn't published it, so there was no reason for you to suspect that he MIGHT know. But you DID know about it, without it going through channels that we knew, and badly garbled and slanted. Oh, as an aside, Melanie – the President's National Security Advisor – also knew about it. She's trained and happens to be an Ambassador from Home, as a liaison to the US government. The whole thing came off as planted information meant to stir up trouble for us. And you took the bait. We pulled you off the hook, but would like to know who was doing the angling,” she said.

“Oh. Well, when you put it that way, it's obvious that it was a rather transparent attempt. I'd gotten a rather significant campaign contribution and a request to look into this matter. The contribution came from a business that does business with many companies in America, and often makes contributions to our campaigns.” And the Senator proceeded to name names of companies, of people in those companies, and of their contacts with various governments. Muriel listened, and passed the information on to Fred's analysis team. The Senator also outlined the threat that had been made to him and his family, that implied that if Enclave knew he was asking around that it was Enclave that would destroy them.

Chapter 3

Soothing a Family (Saturday afternoon)

"Well," Muriel said, "let's get you back to your family." She and the Senator walked to his suite in the Guest House. She, buoyed up by the information she gotten, he depressed that he'd been played so easily. She tried to reassure him that it wasn't his fault. Someone very skilled in the art of disinformation had put together the package he'd delivered. Someone that knew just what buttons to push to create a bad situation.

As they entered the suite, they heard a lot of laughter from more than one person. Sure enough, in the center of the seating was Don, and he was putting on one of his more ridiculous training aids that he usually used on elementary students, to get them interested in history. The Senator's family, and the Envoys in the room, were enjoying it, immensely, and laughing at the antics of the characters in the three dimensional presentation.

Muriel held the Senator back until the presentation was finished. Then, with his eyes wide, he said, "What is this?"

"Oh, Don is more than just a trainer. He's also a teacher," Muriel said, laughing. "He goes around to several schools and puts history into context for the students, showing them what life was like during various periods, and showing events from a human point of view. For elementary students, that is very often from the point of some obscure person that may not even have existed, but who has difficulty in understanding what the 'great ones' are doing with his life. As a result, the students spend their time laughing at the antics of the little man that can't understand, despite the information he's been given. THAT'S a talent, being able to teach what really happened by using a character that has NO idea what happened and gets it all wrong."

"Muriel, you're slipping. It isn't just history. I toss in mathematics, music, art, science, and philosophy. Oh, and politics," Don said.

"Yea, but for you that IS history – the combination of all those things and how they shaped events and people," she replied. "And that's a new one, isn't it? I don't remember seeing it before."

"Hey, I gotta keep the kids interested. Can't show them the same thing every time, can I?" He grinned as he said it.

"Well, the real question is, is it working?"

"Oh, yea," Don said. "I've got teachers all over the country that are using it in their classes. And grades in history as well as a number of other subjects have gone up. So, I'd say it's working pretty well."

"Untrained teachers? How?" asked Muriel.

"I didn't say they were untrained. The training is spreading through the civilian world. Girl, try to keep up," Don said. "I'd been getting requests from teachers to show them how to use these presentations, so last year I brought a bunch in for a week, put them up in Guest House, trained them and dumped the presentations and how to use them on them. It ain't just me anymore, Muriel. Other teachers are using them. Then they come back to me for new ones, sometimes giving me ideas as to areas that need more work, and stuff like that. It keeps me busy and off the streets."

"Yea, like you need help staying off the streets," Muriel said with a grin.

"Well, I'm just glad that Jeff taught me how to make the images and program them. Otherwise, I'd never be able to do this stuff. And it's fun," Don said.

"So, how is your trainee?"

"THEY are fine. Both of them. I may have the key, the trigger, too. It was when I explained about souls and bodies, all of a sudden his brother went into shock, too. No, he's fine," Don said. "Just a couple of minutes, and he was connected, too. So I formalized them both."

"How's their mother taking it?" asked Muriel.

"About how you'd expect. With some shock over their abilities. With some awe. But, overall, pretty well. Bobby was in for a while, and talked with her, and you know how Bobby is. He doesn't let go until a person is comfortable with themselves," Don said. "So then, I was showing them something of what I do, normally. Just to pass the time until you got back. So, how'd it go with you?"

"Wait a minute, Don. Ma'am, how are you dealing with this?" Muriel asked the Senator's wife.

"Well . . . I won't say it isn't a shock. But the boys seem happy. Oh, are they going to have to wear uniforms like you and this young man wear?" she asked.

"Nope. You're civilians. I roped my friends into this back when I first came here. If I knew then what I know now, I probably wouldn't have," Muriel said. "But they DO seem to have fun with it, and I've been very glad, sometimes, that they were here. One in particular, as she's become a Doctor using Envoy techniques. It's possible that you and your husband can be trained, too. But that will be up to you. Don," she said, turning to him, "did they get the 'battlefield first aid' course, too?"

"Yep. And they've been all the way through the formalities and got their passports. They got a kick out of meeting 'that old Marine'. When I told them who it was, they were even more impressed. Apparently, the name Carter means something to them. Now, how'd it go

with you?"

"We got leads from two different directions, but they both point in the same direction. There's still more we need, but then we should be able to roll the whole thing up. We just need to filter out the innocent dupes from the players," Muriel said, "and find the ultimate source, of course."

"Two directions?"

"Yea, some of it got filtered down through a company from another country, and I'll have to get Melanie to have the US Ambassadors beat the bushes for me. That, and what the Captain told me, pretty much nails down where the actual source is and gives some indication of how high up it goes. Trouble is," Muriel said, "that there's a lot of ancillary chatter in that country that could simply replace the top with a new rabid radical. So, it's going to be interesting how we handle it. Too narrow and we leave them with the capability of still going after us and everyone else, PLUS the possibility of their turning public perception against us. Too wide, and we end up with a situation like China, and are again facing public perception. Anyone with a good idea, I'm listening."

"Hit them with public perception BEFORE they can hit you. Publicize what you know for fact, and let the rest of the world realize that they're lying through their teeth," said the Senator.

"Possibility. GOOD possibility. As soon as we know the source for sure, we'll see what we can do with that. Thanks," Muriel said. "But we still have to get the whole group, from bottom to top to make it work. And what about all those that aren't in the group but think the same way and would take over in place of that group? How do we deal with them. They claim it's their religion, but in actuality it's part of a splinter group that simply wants to take control of the world and drive it back into the dark ages."

"So, what can you do about it?" asked the Senator.

"I've got people working on one side of it," Muriel said. "With your permission, I'll send what I've got to Melanie, and maybe she can work the American side of it. Especially since we've got the evidence that you and your family were targeted with missiles. Even though you were on Home property, it may count. She might be able to do something."

"You've got it. Will you send her everything?"

"She's already got the information on the attempted bombing, here. I'll send the rest of what I found out, along with the information you gave me," Muriel replied. "There's something else I'd like to do, too. Just a minute." ::Mata, could you send one of my guys over in the 'security' uniform, please?::

::Sure. What's up?::

::I want to put an Envoy on the Senator, in the 'security' uniform. Not necessarily one

of my guys, but he can show the Senator what the uniform looks like, so he can decide if he wants to allow it. It would let him get back to work,:: Muriel sent.

“OK, Senator. I know you want to get back to work. There's a way we can do this. It'll also emphasize that you've been targeted. And more than that, it'll emphasize that Home has taken an interest in keeping you safe.” As Muriel spoke, a man translated in, in grays with bloused boots and 'Security' triangles on his shoulders that had the Home logo on them. “Take a look at . . . Chuck? What's up, Chuck? Why you?”

“Hey, when my lady calls, I answer. Though watch that phrase or I may just take a vacation and work for the Senator for a while,” Chuck said with a grin. “Senator, I'm just a model. Mata is getting an Envoy, and making sure he understands the situation, to act as your guard. His whole purpose will be to keep you under shields so that you can't be hurt. But he'll have the added benefit of looking intimidating.”

“I should explain that quip. Chuck acts as my chef, and turns out some fabulous meals. He also happens to be my plumber. And sometimes I tease him that if he doesn't behave I'll call him Upchuck,” Muriel said. “And he always threatens to leave my squads. He hasn't yet.”

“Yet,” said Chuck. “There's always a first time,” he added, grinning. “Seriously, Senator, you know the way that bodyguards act on television or movies? Checking a room ahead of their principal, standing close behind him looking at everybody as if they were an enemy. Things like that? Well, that would be the visible part of the security. The invisible part of it would be that you'd be under a shield that NOTHING could get through. Muriel, why don't you show these people what happened to one young girl.”

“Oh, gad,” Muriel said. “All right.” She put a DVD in the player, and started it up. “Now, mind you, it does get loud in one spot.” Shortly, they saw a bunch of kids around one young girl. A minute later, five of the kids pulled out guns and shot her. Except that she didn't fall. After a moment of shock, she pulled the bullets out of the air and put them in her hand.

“That poor girl!” the Senator's wife said.

“Oh, she's all right,” Chuck said. “Her father still has those bullets. He lives not too far away, doesn't he, Muriel?”

“In his obtuse way, Chuck is trying to tell you that the young girl was me. And yes, those were my squads around me. That's how they tested my shields to be sure they would hold. And that wasn't the last time those shields were tested. The worst time was when some jerk of an arms manufacturer ordered someone to fire a chain bomb at me, and they all went off at once. Didn't even muss my hair.”

“There is an added benefit to having an Envoy guard,” Chuck said. “You can translate directly from here to your office, or to the Senate floor, or where-ever you need to go.”

“So they can't catch me in a car, or something,” The Senator said.

“Exactly. By the way, we don't need guns. You notice there isn't one on this uniform. With the amount of power at our command, we can literally dissolve the atomic structure of an object, without causing an explosion. When I talk about protection, I'm not kidding,” Chuck said. “And all you have to do is ask for protection. Enclave doesn't charge for it. Ted claims that, if we did, it would be a protection racket.”

The Senator thought for a second, then groaned. “That was a BAD pun. However, I would like to have an Envoy protect me, if possible.”

“You've got it,” growled a deep voice from the other side of the room. And a man appeared, though it looked like somebody had stuffed him into a uniform like stuffing a sausage. His shoulders were huge. And, as he walked forward, it was obvious that the man was, too. He topped the Senator by a head, and the Senator was six feet tall.

“Actually, Muriel, I think he should have two guards,” said a quiet, child's voice. And from behind Muriel came another man, dressed as a Cossack.

“Anna, what are you doing here?” Muriel asked.

“Offering aid to a friendly nation,” she smiled. “After all, Home and America are friendly, aren't they?”

“Make that three guards,” said a young male voice, and a third monster walked out in a strange green uniform.

“Taylor!” Muriel said. “Your guys are human, not Envoys.”

“That was then, this is now. We trained up five squads of Envoys as 'Jolly Greens' just for special occasions. Anna and I feel that, since we were attacked, too, that we should offer our support for someone that they tried to turn into collateral damage. Senator, we'd be pleased to loan you an Envoy as security guard,” Taylor said.

“Think of us as Ambassadors of Home, rather than any nationality, and it'll be easier. Yes, the uniforms are distinctive,” Anna said. “But that simply shows that the Enclaves act on behalf of Home, and not of a nationality, though we're WITHIN that nationality. It makes it more personal to the people.”

None of the Envoys were armed. All of them looked like they tore up one inch steel plate as a hobby. And the Senator was stunned.

“All right, you monsters, now show the poor man what you normally look like,” Muriel said. And the Cossack became a female child. The 'Jolly Green' became an ordinary looking man. But it was the third, in the American Enclave gray uniform that really got the Senator and his family laughing. It was one of the Guest House servant Envoys that had been taking care of them.

"If it helps, Senator, I also happen to be a doctor. I just preferred working here with people's upset stomachs and bumps and bruises, and as an occasional backup for Fran, than as an actual doctor," the Guest House Envoy said.

"Senator," said Muriel, "Envoys can look any way they want to. They're pure soul. Or, if you prefer, they're intelligent power. And it isn't until they get into a body that they get delusions of gender," she added, smiling.

The Senator stopped laughing, and his wife started shaking. The sons raced to the mother and helped her relax. The Guest House Envoy went to the Senator.

"Hmm. Why don't you two goofs come to my office. I think there's enough Envoys around here to help them," Muriel said with a soft, warm smile.

"How . . . ?" asked Taylor.

"I think it's the reference to an Envoy soul getting into a body that does it," Muriel said. "And it isn't anyone, just those that are still on the neutral or plus side of the balance. I think the President is going to be in for a shock Monday morning. I'd better alert Melanie."

Chapter 4

Surprise, Surprise (Monday morning)

"Mister President, thank you for seeing me on such short notice," the Senator said. "I don't know whether or not you've been keeping up with the news, but . . . hmm. That whole line sounds familiar. In any case, I'm here to do what I've heard called 'pulling a Muriel'. I'm making a target of myself. I'm also getting details of what happened to me out into the public to antagonize a bunch of people that have made a serious mistake. There are two things you ought to know before I proceed. First, this disk contains all I know and all Muriel and friends could find out about the information I was spouting Saturday morning. The second is that I will not be unguarded while playing target. Come on in, boys" he said and sent. And suddenly the room seemed smaller. A LOT smaller.

"Whoosh!" exclaimed Melanie. "What do you feed them? Whole cows? Each?" The President just laughed.

"They're Envoys" the Senator said. "Muriel was kind enough to loan me one. Then, the Ambassador to Russia felt that she should show solidarity and loaned me one. And, not to be outdone, the Ambassador to Britain felt he should chip in. And suddenly, I feel like a child."

"Wait a minute!" Melanie said. "I KNOW that one. He works for Guest House."

"I do, indeed, Miss Carter. And it's a pleasure to see you again," the Envoy in gray said.

"Do you object to human guards?" Melanie asked, rather accusatively.

"Oh, no. This was Muriel's idea, and I think I agree. Muriel and the Enclaves were attacked. I was attacked while on Home property. This shows that Home is behind me and supportive of my efforts to end such terrorist activities," the Senator said to Melanie. Then, turning to the President, he added, "I was wrong, before. And Muriel was very understanding about it not being my fault, and SHOWED me what had happened. More. She showed me how she gets information from recalcitrant people. She literally linked to my mind to show me what all went on when she supervised the search of the ship that shot at us. I was in the service, and I've NEVER seen anyone make decisions and give orders faster."

"Now, she needs your help. If she has to take unilateral action against those that have acted so abominably, it would likely cause the world to fear Home and the Enclaves. And she doesn't see that as a good possibility for anyone. She hopes that you can come up with some purely human answer to the problem, using the laws that we have and are able to use. In the mean time, I'm going to the Senate chamber and try to explain why it's a bad idea to take money from foreign nations. That they have their own agenda that does not necessarily

work to help the ordinary citizens of the United States. And I'm taking these Envoys with me to emphasize the fact ANYONE can be targeted for not following the edicts of such tyrants. It's time to end this ridiculous situation before we cause our own destruction."

"I wish you luck with that," said the President. "And you're taking your guards?"

"Yes. Two of them are going in first, to check it out. Then the third and I will translate in," the Senator replied.

"Well, that ought to get their attention," Melanie murmured.

"Your Envoys guards can make a record of it. I'd like a copy when it's over," the President said. "It might affect how we go about dealing with this. It might even help Muriel."

"I'll have them do that, sir," he said. One of the Envoys touched his sleeve, and the Senator nodded. "I need to be going now," he said as two Envoys translated out. And a second later he and the third also left.

"He's trained," the President said.

"You noticed. He's trying to hide it, and I respect that. He doesn't want the others to know that he 'went over to the other side', so to speak," Melanie said. "When this is over, though, I'd love to find out how he got trained."

"That's obvious. Muriel and her crew. Well," the President said, "it looks like we've got religious persecution and assault with a deadly weapon to hold over who ever gave him the information. But that person's probably a dupe. I think you'd call him a 'cut out'."

"Yep. You might be able to stir up interest in the UN with this, since attacks took place in every country that has an Enclave. If this came through an Embassy, you might be able to have the person sent home with a strongly worded warning to the government about giving disinformation to our government," Melanie said.

"And if it wasn't?" asked the President. "He intimated that it had come from a company. That could imply a civilian."

"So, let's check his record and see," Melanie said. They put it on the computer and watched all the way through. The President occasionally taking notes. When it was over, Melanie said, "Civilian, then. And he's still in the country."

"Have your people pick him up," the President replied. "Do you know what trick Muriel uses to get information?"

"No. It would be illegal under US law, so I purposely have stayed away from it," she lied. "However, we might have just cause to have her help in investigating"

"Hmm, good thought," he said. ::Muriel, are you busy?::

::I wondered how long it would take you to get back to me,:: her mental giggle came across like a breath of fresh air. ::Have Melanie hold up on arresting the person. We know from the Senator's record, that there are at least two known levels above that person. What about my coming with her, and we pick up all three? And can you authorize 'unorthodox' interrogation techniques in a case like this?::

::Actually,:: the President sent, ::I was considering shutting down the entire company and seizing their records. It's likely that they got instructions from somebody. And this counts as espionage.::

::Write it up. Or, actually, have Melanie write it up. I'll be there in a couple of minutes. I need to finish something here,:: Muriel sent back.

"Hmm. I'm beginning to think she's playing a deeper game than I thought," the President said to Melanie. "Would you write up a request for her help in the investigation? Write it up so that she helps you in shutting down a company, or whatever else is necessary."

"OK, can I deputize her and her crew?"

"OH! Good thought. If she'll buy it," he replied. "She may not want to be tied down like that, though."

"I'll make it an option," Melanie said. "But it would be slicker if she could put a badge on her Envoys. Then she could translate them back to Enclave, and what she does there would be under Home rules, rather than ours."

The President just snickered. "Nice. She's official on the take-down, and has free rein in the interrogation. Yea, that might work."

"Well?" Muriel said, as she translated in. "Where's the paperwork?"

"Jeez! Girl. Give me a minute, will you? We just worked out what we wanted you to do! It'll take me another minute to put it on paper," Melanie said, and they both laughed.

"So, why don't you fill me in while she's doing the paperwork," Muriel asked the President.

"We want you to assist in a take-down of a company. It would look better if you were deputized to do it. Oh, and your Envoys, too. Any problems with that?" he asked.

"Lots. First of all, our interrogation techniques wouldn't pass a Congressional 'sniff test'," she replied.

"Oh, sorry. I left that out. You do the take-down, people and records, and take them to Enclave. Obviously, we don't have any control there, so you're back under Home rules."

"Is that legal?" asked Muriel.

"I don't see why not. You've got a dog in this fight. After all, the Senator was in Enclave when the missiles targeted him. And you'd be 'assisting us in our inquiries'," he replied.

"You know, you're getting as bad as I am for working around the rules," she laughed. "But if it looks good on paper, I'll take it. What are we being deputized as?"

"I thought Secret Service. Just change 'Security' to Secret Service on your black triangles, and I'll show you the emblem to replace the Home logo," Melanie said.

"Oh, good, you aren't talking about putting us in suits or those ridiculous uniforms the uniformed squads use," Muriel said.

"Not hardly. We want you and your crew showing up in the videos the media make," Melanie said, with a smile.

"Wait a minute! Nobody said anything about the media being there!" Muriel hollered.

"Of course they did. I did. Just now. Good publicity, as well as showing that the Enclaves CAN work with national governments when it suits them . . . I mean, when requested," Melanie replied.

"Grrr! I ought to refuse to help you," Muriel replied.

"Well, you could, but then you'd miss all the fun. I figured we'd go in like that old CIA caper. Kill all utilities and translate in, and immobilize people until we can move them out, then grab all the records. I'm betting you will find who passed the information to the Senator AND who sent the signal to the ship in the Gulf of California to terminate him and his family. Oh, did I mention that the company is a bank?" Melanie asked.

"No, you seem to have left that part out," Muriel said. "Does it make a difference?"

"Yes, because we'll turn it over to you . . . well Triple E, but that's you. It's not payment, you understand. It's for their involving Enclave in a nasty attempt at assassination. So, you get to control it in the absence of it's normal people, and follow back to it's source," Melanie said. "That gives you the lead into the country, and at the top levels, too, since the bank is ultimately owned by the government, and there's been some suspicious financial transactions with it."

"How suspicious?" asked Muriel.

"Well . . . it seems that some of the profits from the bank are being funneled to an account in another country. We've been unable to track where they go from there," Melanie said.

"You're trying very hard to make this attractive to me. Why do you want me in charge of this bank?" asked Muriel.

"Because we think that the funds are being funneled to terrorists," Melanie said. "We want you to find out."

"Free rein?"

"Well"

"Melanie, I can't do my job if you tie my hands. You're also pushing me to make a decision that I don't want to make about the country. If they're passing money to terrorists and giving orders to kill people in such a way as to take out civilians, then I'm going to have to act. And that means that another country will suddenly find itself either under the rule of Home . . . or it'll be glass," Muriel said. "Right now, I don't have a third alternative. It's why we put this in your hands to begin with. Oh, I'll do the investigation for you. But I won't be pushed into taking action under these circumstances."

Melanie looked at the President. "She's right, you know," he said. "She's endangering the reputation of Home if she takes another unilateral action. Right now, the other countries are afraid that she'll do just that – start a war, win it, and take possession of the country."

"Think like a cop, Melanie. How can we beat this?" asked Muriel. Melanie looked at the floor for a minute.

"He says that I've been thinking like a Marine," Melanie finally said.

"He?" asked the President.

"She means her father," Muriel replied. "So, what would a cop do?"

"Gather evidence, turn it over to the Attorney General. On the evidence we have, I could get a warrant to seize the records and hold the employees for questioning. That would effectively shut down the bank. That would freeze a lot of funds, especially if we pulled them in local before we shut it down. The records should give us further leads."

"MAY give you further leads," Muriel said. "They may have covered their tracks too well. So, authorize me and my troops to take the evidence you've got and investigate it. And you're right that we need to go in with you. There may be hidden places they keep such records. And the Envoys would know how to find them and retrieve them without triggering a destruct mechanism. But the bank stays closed. Would you, as a cop, have the authority to pull the funds in locally?"

"I don't know," Melanie said.

"I can't do it outside of Enclave. You know that," Muriel said. "And, in the time it would take us to get the keys, the passwords, the home office could pull the accounts away from us."

And a lot of people are going to lose money. Innocent people that don't know their money is going to fund terrorists. Then there's the media side of it. This is going to be a very public action, unlike the CIA event was. What are you going to tell them?"

"You're pushing, girl," Melanie said.

"Yep. I am. Because this is going to have to be done legally in the eyes of the world. Or it isn't going to be done at all," Muriel said. "Oh, when we shut down the building, we'll be shutting down the WHOLE building. Anyone on any upper floors?"

"Just trading companies I . . . oh. Yea, they might be involved," Melanie said. She looked blank for a minute, then said, "There is a link between the traders and the bank. Some of the bank's funds go through them."

"Then we should probably see about them, too," Muriel said.

"I'll get the warrants," said Melanie.

"Now?" asked Muriel

"Yes," Melanie replied.

"Good. 'If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well It were done quickly', Muriel retorted. "It's from the Scottish Play," she said, grinning. "I'll even wear kilts for the event."

"Goof!" Melanie retorted, and translated out.

Chapter 5

Jihad

(Monday afternoon)

The take-down, when it came, only took an hour. Muriel had called in not only her squads but also twenty Envoys from Home. The ones from Home came in stealthed, and waited for the signal from Muriel to cut all power and utilities, and put a blanket shield over the building. One of them noticed that there was a generator in the basement, so he made sure it, too, would be cut off.

Muriel's squads and twenty Secret Service – headed by Melanie – entered by translation, so no one could see them coming, once the shield was up. Muriel stayed with Melanie, but her troops went through the entire building, translating records and computers to Home for investigation. A section of the warehouse prison was used for that. They also translated out any people that they found along the way, after Melanie's people formally arrested them on suspicion of terrorist activities. Melanie's people took care of the bank, proper, making sure that there weren't any people missing, and arresting everyone there, then they, too were translated to the prison. Mostly, from Muriel's point of view, it was boring and routine.

After the obvious stuff was out, then came the all out search. Envoys went over every section of walls, floors and ceiling. Even the basement and the attic crawl space were checked. All the ducts for heating/air conditioning were examined. Every desk and chair, and the bathrooms were checked. When they got done all the evidence had been tagged and logged, and nothing was left in the building except the furniture. Even the partitions in the bank and in the trader's offices were checked.

Muriel and her squads exited the bank along with Melanie, and were immediately accosted by the media. The first thing they noticed was that the Ambassador from Home was with the National Security Advisor. The second thing they noticed was that she sported the Secret Service emblem on her hat and shoulders. Calls of 'Madam Ambassador' and 'Miss Muriel', along with questions about what she was doing there and whether this meant that Home was aligned with America overlapped each other. Finally, Melanie stepped forward and raised her hand to quiet them. And, when that didn't work, used Marine Corps command voice on them.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” she finally said when they quieted. “We've had a long day. As you may know, a Senator was targeted while he was on Home property over the weekend. He's back to work, now, with bodyguards consisting of Envoys from three different Enclaves. As a result of this mess, Muriel consented to assist us in our investigation of the case. And we consented to assist her in hers. This was done in accordance with the treaty. She and her Envoys were deputized in order to cover all the legalities of this kind of action. She and her Envoys will be assisting us further, in ways that only she and they can do, to conclude this investigation. Until then, I really can't say anything more, other than that Home is no more

aligned with America than with any other country. And this building is closed, the bank is shut down and the accounts locked until further notice.” When she finished, she and Muriel translated to the President's office, and the Envoys, except for one squad, translated back to Enclave or Home, depending on their point of origin. When they arrived, the President was laughing at something the Senator had just said.

“Darn!” Muriel said. “I think we missed a good story.”

“You would have loved it, Muriel,” the Senator said. “When the first two guards translated in, they looked and nodded and smiled, and looked and smiled some more, all the time looking like they were ready to attack somebody with bare hands, feet, and teeth. Then the third one and I translated in, and he did the same as the others, looking all around and smiling, and looking totally dangerous. Then I gave my little speech about avoiding money from those that would try to use them for their own purposes. I did NOT restrict it to just foreign nationals, either. And after relating how my family and I had been targeted for assassination, I think I got the point across.”

“Then I went to my office. Two went in first, and when we got the OK, so did the third and I. And I found that there were a number of cases of incontinence in the room. The Envoys were nice enough to remove the evidence, which embarrassed them even more,” he added. “It took an hour for the Envoys to assure the people that they wouldn't attack. I finally got some work done, correspondence that needed to go out, mostly to businesses that were donating campaign funds, letting them know that it did NOT mean that I was bought, and if they felt that wasn't appropriate, then I'd return the funds. Then the President called to tell me you'd be on your way back, shortly, so my Envoys and I translated back. And that's it.”

“Well,” said Melanie, when she and Muriel stopped laughing, “I guess it's my turn.” And she related how the take-down had gone, and the disposition of the people and materials. In the mean time, Muriel monitored the activity in Enclave, to see how they were progressing with the investigation.

“Wait! You got EVERYTHING in the bank?” asked the President.

“Yep. And in the trader's offices. Two hidden safes in the bank, and one in the traders offices. Also, one desk with a hidden panel. ALL the computers, files, and records in both, and all the people in both. We rolled up the whole operation,” Melanie said.

“Well, I guess it's my turn,” the President said. “Everything was quiet after the Senator left, until after his little speech to the Senate. THEN, well, I had five visitors demanding that his guards be banned from the Senate floor. One of them lingered, afterward, and was all over me about how it was inappropriate for a US Senator to have foreign nationals as guards, and that it showed favoritism on the part of the US for Home. And that it was also inappropriate for a US Senator to suggest that Senators shouldn't take money from foreign businesses in order to further the interests of those businesses. I did a check on that particular Senator, and discovered that he was in deep with certain Middle Eastern countries. I was about to call him back in when you alerted me that you'd be returning. He's been fostering all sorts of ridiculous bills, fortunately all defeated, to restrict religion, women's rights,

and behavior toward other countries.”

“Before you call him back,” Muriel said. “I think you should know. I have a positive link back to the President and Supreme Leader of Iran. It also suggests that the Assembly of Twelve is involved. Fred is trying to check the accounts of the Supreme Leader, now. Lower down in the government is where the money actually comes in, for the most part. There are exceptions. And a lot of that is sent out to various questionable organizations of a violent nature. They were due for a payment, today, and so far it looks like they haven't gotten it yet. Expect a nasty note from their government about interference with commerce, or some such.”

“I have a question for you, sir,” said Melanie. “How did a bank with ties to Iran even get into this country?”

“Oh, that one is simple,” the President replied. “They bought a bank that already had a presence in America. And since they're a commercial bank and never let on to their customers that they were funneling funds to Iran, or that they were even connected to Iran, they slid by. I checked with some of my advisors and none of them knew about the link, either. It wasn't until Muriel's and the Senator's records came in that we knew about it.”

“Well,” said the Senator, “I should probably go back to my office and let you have your fun with that other Senator.” And after other goodbyes and pleasantries he and his guards translated out.

“Mister President,” his secretary said, “that Mullah is back.”

“Thank you,” he said to her. “That Mullah, huh? Unofficial mouthpiece for Iran, though he claims to be from a different country. Well, show him in, please.” Melanie faded back against a wall near the door. Muriel simply told her squad to go stealth, and remained seated right next to where the Mullah would have to sit.

“Mister President,” the Mullah said, casting a disgusted look at Muriel as he approached the desk. “I hope you are well.”

“Ah, as well as can be expected in these trying times,” the President replied. “And you? Has Allah favored you?”

“Allah does as Allah will, and I am but his servant,” was the reply. “Perhaps it would be better if you asked your . . . 'guest' . . . to leave. This is not the time for women's ears, in the discussion of men.” Muriel bit her tongue.

“You can speak freely, sir,” the President said. “I would not interrupt her important business for the pleasantries of even so august a person as yourself.”

“Then, perhaps I should come back later.”

“And perhaps you should speak plainly concerning your business with me, today. In fact,” the President added, “I'm going to have to insist on it, as it may have bearing on

Ambassador Muriel's presence, here.”

“Muriel?” asked the President, while sending, ::DON'T leave. Be as outrageous as you please, but I think I know what this is about.::

“Mister President, since you and I are both Leaders of our respective countries, and the Mullah is simply a religious leader, I see no conflict with my staying. It's even possible that I might gain some enlightenment by listening to his words,” she replied, ignoring the soft choking sound from Melanie.

“Mister President, I really must insist. These are not matters that women should be privy to. They are of a somewhat delicate nature.”

“Ah,” Muriel said, brightly, “then this IS about the closing of the bank that somehow managed to hide its connection to Iran in violation of Federal law, and that has been funneling funds to terrorists.” The only reason that Melanie's choking wasn't heard was because the Mullah's was louder. “We're checking the companies that do business with it, now. After all, after two terrorist attacks involving the property of Home, one of which involved a US Senator, you can't expect that there would be no investigation, do you?”

The Mullah now regarded Muriel much as one would look at a mixture of the foulest offal and poisonous snake. “Mister President, I demand that you have this . . . female . . . removed, immediately,” he finally managed to sputter out.

“Oh, I don't think so. Muriel, isn't it true that, in actuality, an Ambassador carries her Embassy with her, where ever she goes?” asked the President.

“So I've heard,” said Muriel. “I've never counted on it, though. What are you suggesting?”

“That since you ARE the Embassy, so to speak,” the President said, “and since your assistance in the investigation was requested, officially, you should have no trouble with asking this kind, helpful man the questions necessary to aid our investigations.”

“MISTER PRESIDENT! I must protest,” the Mullah said.

“Protest away,” the President replied. “Terrorists activities have been enacted against a foreign national Embassy located in the United States. And, in order to enact those activities, persons and/or objects of destruction have had to pass through portions of the United States. We already have connections to the bank that was closed, and the investigation is ongoing along that stream. Now, we have evidence that you are affiliated with them. Muriel, acting in the capacity of the Leader of Home and Ambassador to earth, needs no warrant from the United States to investigate your connection to the activities.”

As the Mullah started to get out of his chair, Muriel pushed him back down with a shield, and locked him into it. “Now, Mister, you will discover that it really isn't a good idea to consider women to be inferior to men.” She switched his mind to 'truth', and the questions

started. And the answers made it clear that he was, in fact, from Iran and was actively engaged in, and in fact leading, the terrorist activities and fund funneling that had been going on. Finally, Muriel ran out of questions.

“What do you want done with him, Mister President?”

“Why don't you give him protective custody in Enclave, Muriel. I'd hate to have anything happen to him. Oh, and could you have someone 'investigate' his office and home?”

“Wouldn't I need a warrant for that, sir?”

“Hmm. You may be right,” he replied.

“On it, sir. One of my guys has gone to a judge with the confession this man just gave. It shouldn't be long,” Melanie said.

“You can't do this,” shouted the Mullah, now returned to his normal state. “It's against the law!”

“Really,” said the President. “So is violent action taken in order to promote fear in the population of a foreign country, which is what you have been shown to be a part of. This is now a criminal investigation of your behavior. Should you be found guilty of such actions you may be incarcerated in a prison of our choice so that you can reflect on the fact that we DO have laws in America. In the mean time, you will be held in a prison in Enclave to protect you and keep you from harming yourself. And your effects, both personal and professional, will be examined for evidence of your wrong-doing.”

“Mata, if you please?” asked Muriel. And the Mullah was translated out.

“So, the Senator is still playing his game of not having been trained,” Muriel said to the President when the Mullah had left.

“Actually, I think it's cute,” the President replied. “I know why he's doing it. He doesn't dare let his pose slip, so he uses it all the time. But, he must have seen the stripes on me, signifying that I was trained. And still he kept quiet. He's playing the 'poor little, weak Senator that would be an easy mark'. And the result is that those Envoys may be able to pick up some other stringers, and maybe get evidence on other leaders in this country illegally. Hmm,” he added, “I should make a note to have that added to his list of crimes, since he admitted that he's from Iran, and not Afghanistan.”

“Well, it's obvious that he's Shi'ite. And, with all due respect, I tend to pronounce that as if it were written without the apostrophe, without the second 'l', and without the final 'e'. Oh, and with a short 'l' sound. But that's simply because so many of the terrorist organizations seem to stem from that branch,” Muriel said. “I imagine that in reality there are very good people that follow the doctrines of the Shi'ite branch of Islam. It's just too bad that they're not in charge.”

"Well, as we've seen even in this country, there are radical versions of peaceful religions that advocate violence. And, for that matter, advocate lying in order to get their way. Look what happened to your friend four years ago," the President said.

"I know. And I have as much respect for the radical Muslims as I do for the radical Christians. None at all. And I have even less respect for those that would try to foist their religious beliefs on others by political means," Muriel said. "And now they're trying financial means of destroying us. Or at least using financial means to fund their extra-curricular activities. That's why we took over some banks, way back when, you know."

"I didn't know. Well, maybe I did, in a way. Ted was moving on a bunch of businesses at that time," the President said. "I knew you took over some banks, but not why."

"Oh, the main reason was the recession, as they called it, as a result of a bubble the banks had caused through bad lending practices and Wall Street fiascoes," Muriel said. "But there was the additional reason that they were trying to get into politics, and Ted saw a pattern that had pervaded Western civilization for centuries. Basically, the banks had grown larger and larger, then started 'owning' the political structure, and rewriting laws in their favor. Then there'd be a crash, and the only ones to make out were the banks. It kept civilization down for a LONG time. Having to rebuild a civilization every eighty years or so can do that."

"Wait a minute!" said the President. "We just went through a recession. Do you mean to tell me that . . ."

"Yep. The banks were behind it. Ended up owning a lot of property they couldn't get rid of by foreclosing on middle class people that got crunched, financially," Muriel said. "So, Ted drove their stock down – don't ask how, I don't want to know the chicanery that he used, and neither do you – then bought up three of them and took them private. Right off of Wall Street. That meant that Home, then, owned all those properties that the banks had foreclosed on. So we turned around and gave them to the people the banks had raped. As I recall, it cost a small fortune to do it, but the end result was that the bubble didn't fully burst, but just deflated gradually in a way that the country could absorb."

"As I recall, a lot of people trashed their houses in protest," the President said.

"Yep. And that was the easy part. We sent Envoys in and fixed them up. In some cases rebuilding them, because they were no longer structurally sound," Muriel said. "They'll never need painting, plumbing, electrical, or roofs, for example. And they will be more economical to live in, too."

"Jeez! People were complaining that you were destroying the American economy!"

"Yep. We destroyed it, all right. We forced companies to compete on a more level playing field that benefited the public," Muriel said. "We turned the banks into HONEST businesses, rather than 'make a quick buck and screw your neighbor' organizations. We supported the working and middle class. We improved the value of the dollar. We got laws that only benefited businesses repealed and taxes made more reasonable through our

underhanded political means. Oh, and we told the religions to make like a hockey player.”

“All right, that one eluded me,” the President said.

“She means that she told them to get the Puck out of Politics,” Melanie said, with a snicker. The President simply covered his face with his hands and groaned.

“Melanie, what did your guys give us?” Muriel asked. “Apparently, someone was fast enough on the uptake to visually scan documents as he collected them from the Mullah's office. Fred's jumping up and down, and dancing all over my office.”

“News to me, girl. What's he saying?”

“Connection, connection, connection,” Muriel said. Then added, “Oh, my gosh! It's a coded letter from the Ayatollah. It mentions Jihad against Home. And another one that specifies that, if the Senator doesn't get in line, he's to be eliminated. We've got him. Mister President, how do you want to handle this?”

“Wait,” he said. “We need to roll up the fellow travelers, too, if we can. No sense leaving all those radical Muslim clerics loose if we can help it. It would simply mean we'd have to do the whole thing all over again, without knowing where it was coming from. As you've so ably pointed out.”

Chapter 6

To Wait or Not To Wait (Tuesday)

Tuesday didn't change the fact that they still didn't have enough information on the clerics in Iran to roll the whole mess up. The closing of the bank had brought nasty speeches from Iran about how the US was hurting the little people of America. Other notes from various companies in America served to identify those that had ties to Iran in one form or another. All four of Muriel's squads were hard at work, either sorting out information in the prison warehouse or collating it and passing it to Fred's analysis team.

Muriel was bummed out. She had nothing to do, and she HATED waiting. But she agreed with the President. It should all be done at once, or it would simply have to be done over again later.

Ted's squads were working another angle, finding the companies that banked with that particular bank that Melanie and Muriel had closed. They were looking for information that might lead to further arrests in America – links to terrorism. So far, they'd come up with three of them.

Even the Manager of Guest House was involved, but in a compassionate way. He was sorting through the names of depositors in the bank that were just ordinary people with no knowledge of what the bank was up to with their money. They were hurting, now. With the bank closed, they couldn't pay bills or buy groceries or gas. So, he recruited a number of Envoys from Home to go on missions of mercy and provide for them. The Manager had thought of it, himself, but had passed it past Muriel before enacting it. And it made her feel good that there was a good side to the whole mess. People were beginning to understand that Home and the Enclave actually DID care about people, and weren't the ogres that they'd been shown as being. It even resulted in more civilians being trained, and spreading the word to still others.

Chun, on the other hand, was incensed. The bank had supposedly been a Hong Kong bank – at least according to their papers filed with Securities and Exchange Commission. Chun knew that that was an impossibility, since all Chinese banks had been nationalized with her takeover, and any such connections would have been terminated at that time. She wanted in on rolling up the . . . well, Muriel shied away from even describing what Chun had called them.

Movement, caught out of the corner of her eye, proved to be just Ted coming into her office. "I know it's hard," he said as he sat down and poured coffee from the thermos bottle on her coffee table. "It's like the military all over again. Hurry up and wait. But they really are making progress," he added, indicating the squads and by extension his own squads.

"I know," Muriel replied. "That doesn't mean I have to like it. Isn't there SOMETHING

that I can do?”

“Sure,” Ted said. “You can get in the way and slow thing down.” Muriel stuck her tongue out at him. “Seriously,” he added, “they know what they’re doing, and are much faster at it than we would be.”

“So, we just sit here and twiddle our thumbs?”

“Youth,” Ted said. “Always wanting to be on the go. You need to learn to relax when you can, or you’ll wear yourself out before you even see action.”

“Easy for you to say. You’re OLD!” she replied.

“Yup. I am. And proud of it. Look how relaxed I am,” he said.

“Sure, you are. And you say that as you sit there guzzling down coffee by the gallon,” Muriel said. “You’re just as up tight as I am. You know, some of those ‘depositors’ were actually local terrorist groups that were getting some of the funneled funds. I wonder if that’s happening in the other countries, too.”

“Yep. That’s what my guys are working on right now. We know this bank was in contact with others. Some of those contacts were normal banking transfers. Others, we think were funneling to other organizations in other countries. Bart’s trying to find the links,” Ted said. “And before you ask, no, putting more people or Envoys on it wouldn’t help. They’d just start getting in each other’s way. Besides, we’ve alerted all the Enclaves about what’s happening here. They’re all looking into their own banks and situations.”

“OK, what about the hardware. Every Enclave was attacked. Those attacks were all local, using local help and local materials. Any way to trace any of that back up the line?” asked Muriel.

“No. In many cases, the materials were stolen,” Ted said. “Some of it was military. Some from construction or mining. Some from demolitions.”

“Ted, there’s ‘stolen’ and then there’s ‘reported stolen’. Which were they?” asked Muriel.

Ted looked startled. “I don’t know,” he said. “Let’s find out.”

It took getting records on materials and people who were in charge of the explosives in all the countries. In the case of China, the materials and people were in neighboring countries that weren’t happy with giving out the information. However, Muriel and Ted had lots of help from the Envoys in the various countries. Britain was the exception. Taylor was already working on tracing materials and people back. His dual status as both prince and Ambassador helped. So did having two squads of ‘Jolly Greens’ show up – armed. Finally, around noon Arizona time, they had enough information to begin to put together a picture.

Materials had led to people, which had led to financial reports, which had led to more people. And the reports began to roll in. All of the countries had long since severed diplomatic relations with Iran. But it was found that regardless of that individuals had managed to get into the country – illegally, under assumed names – and had worked their way into banks. No great surprise, there. But they'd also gotten into other fields, such as demolition or even the military. The people that actually handled the explosives and created the bombs had been from various ideologies. But the ones that had directed them and paid them had invariably come from Iran.

In several of the countries, banks were closed and the records confiscated and examined. Much like in America, the tracks eventually led back to Iran, and to those high in power in the government. Meanwhile, information on the radical clerics in Iran began coming in and, low and behold, lead to the same people in the government.

“You know,” Muriel said, “if I didn't know better, I'd be looking for black Envoys, again. This looks awfully suspicious.”

“It does, doesn't it. Same type of organization. But consider – humans are Envoy souls in a body. So you're not really all that far fetched,” Ted replied.

“I begin to see why Chun took a radical approach to the PRC government,” she added.

“Yep. They can't change, so they die, permanently,” Ted said. “I'm not sure we can do that with these people, though. Too many human governments involved that want to have their say in what happens. After all, these are true humans, not Envoys in masquerade.”

::Muriel, can you come talk to the President, please?:: Melanie sent.

::Hold on.: “Ted,” Muriel said, “Melanie has asked me to come see the President. She didn't say why.”

“Mata,” Ted said, “is there any way to pull a squad off of the investigation for a bit? Melanie has asked Muriel to go see the President. I have a hunch he's going to try to pressure her into something she doesn't want to do.”

::Ted, this is Anna. I've got a squad she can use.::

::Ted, Taylor here. I've got an available squad of Envoys trained as 'Jolly Greens' that she's more than welcome to make use of.::

::Ted, I've got my squad of Dragons on the way,:: Chun sent. ::I advise using all of them. This sounds like he wants her to pull a 'diplomatic mission' using the only 'country' that hasn't had diplomatic relations with Iran. In that case, she's going to need all the support she can get. I'll send the peacocks, too, if you like.::

“Whoosh. I ask Mata about a squad for you, and everyone chimes in. You've got squads from Russia, China and Britain on the way, girl. I'd STILL like to know how you do it.

Anyway, you're covered. Did you hear the conversations?"

"Yea. You know, Chun might be right. And, for something like that, even just talking to the President, I may need the backing," Muriel said.

::OK, Melanie. Tell him I'll be there in a minute. Oh, and expect a crowd. I'm not going into this alone,:: Muriel sent back. Looking out her window, she saw four squads and Mata formed up waiting for her, so she walked out and joined them.

Moments later they were all in the President's office. "You wanted to see me, Mister President," Muriel said sweetly, while around her grouped some of the toughest looking figures one could imagine, all daring him to try something.

"Um . . . actually, I was expecting you to be alone," he replied.

"NOT going to happen . . . sir. I'm not going to be backed into anything simply to salve your conscience or that of the government. And I can't represent just America. I have to either represent just Home, or ALL the countries of earth as well as Home," Muriel said. "Now, with that out of the way, what did you want to see the Leader of Home about?"

"What happened to the sweet girl I knew," he said.

"Oh, I'm still sweet. And innocent. And I won't be pushed around, and I think you know that from past experience," Muriel said. "Mister President, you've got to understand that, when I was made Leader of Home a lot of things changed. Instead of just being a liaison between earth and Home, now I'm the one in charge of how things are done. And it is spelled right out in the treaty that I can only act to help a country – ANY country – in emergency situations, and then it can't be construed as favoritism to any particular country. ALL the treaties are set up that way. I know you know that. You have copies of all the treaties, and have read them. They are all virtually alike. I can be flexible enough to represent ALL of the countries, where doing so is also representing Home, simply because it would NOT be showing favoritism to any particular country."

"Look," she added. "I tossed this back to Melanie in the hopes that she could find an earth-legal way of solving the dilemma. If I have to go in and take out the government, then we've got another situation like China, but without the support of the people of Iran. That's going to make things VERY dicey. For everyone. Go talk to the other countries. If they decide that they ALL want me to represent them, then I'll be glad to do it, and to discuss with you, and any of them that want to, just what stand we will ALL take on this matter. But I can't do it for just one."

Looking pained, the President said, "I see your point. OK, I'll see what I can do with the other countries."

"I suggest you talk to them, too, about what to do if military action is the only solution that can be agreed on," Muriel said. "We managed with China simply because the majority of the people WERE behind it becoming an Enclave. But what will happen with Iran. There are

a number of countries that would like to get their hands on Iran's oil. Me? Personally? What would I like to do? We've got the ship that was used to throw missiles at the Senator. I'd love to drop it from about twenty feet up, right in front of their government offices, and tell them that the next time they pull a stunt like that I'd haul all of them out in front of their people and deliver the spanking they should have gotten as children. But it won't work. It would simply enrage them to more drastic action, and possibly against a country that CAN'T defend itself against them."

"So, what do you want from us?" he asked.

"Find a legal way to show them that their behavior is illegal – unlawful. That aggression against another people or country is not appropriate behavior. That it's uncivilized. And that it won't be condoned. In other words, a public trial where they have no choice but to submit to the will of the people of Earth," Muriel said. "I doubt, seriously, that you could get the world court to even consider it, but I was hoping you could find a way to do something like that."

"Something like that. In other words, a tribunal. And who would head it? And what would be the charges, and what would be the punishments involved. In fact, how many people are you talking about putting on trial?"

"The number of people would be enormous," Muriel said. "This isn't just the government of Iran. This involves companies and banks in several countries, as well as individuals acting outside those companies but at either their orders or orders from Iran. It also includes all the radical clerics in Iran – the ones that are fostering this hate campaign. As for who would be in charge and what the punishments would be, again that would have to be up to the countries of earth."

"What would the charges be?"

"The only 'law' that the Enclaves have is that it is illegal to disturb the peace. That covers everything from a loud argument with your neighbor to throwing missiles around," Muriel said. "Laws are a human invention, Mister President. Home and the Enclaves see no reason to be so specific."

"So, you're saying that we would have to all decide on a world law that would cover something like this. It can't be done," the President said.

"Then figure out a way that the country can be taken over, legally. Otherwise you may find that it's become a country of glass a foot thick, and that nothing will grow there or be usable there ever again," Muriel said. "Because I'm awfully afraid that that's what would result from my going in and 'spanking' the government. It would start revolts all over the country with various factions trying to take control for their own benefit."

"Mister President," said Melanie, "look out the window. Every Enclave on earth has sent a squad to support Muriel. EVERY Enclave. And every one of them, even the 'Jolly Greens' that are in here, are Envoys. The Envoys of Home support Muriel one hundred

percent. In what earth country can a leader say the same thing? If she decided on unilateral action, today, they'd be right there with her. But she's not. She's trying to get earth to clean up it's own mess. And they're STILL backing her. Because unilateral action on her part, right now in this case, would be a disaster for the whole purpose of Home. And that's simply to bring training to people. To make their lives better and more fulfilling. To make them more secure in their lives."

"Look, I'm not trying to be a hard-ass, here," Muriel said. "I'm trying to generate a discussion of what to do about the mess. This won't be the last time we see something like this. The people of Iran have been indoctrinated to believe that the training is evil. They've been brainwashed by their leaders. They're just not going to accept it. And we can't force it on them – they have to ask for it. So that leaves out the possibility of a population accepting becoming an Enclave. THAT is what tosses it back to human solutions. So, what can WE do about it? We, meaning humans AND Envoys. What can we do to show the population that the leaders are wrong? That they've been harming not only others but their own citizens?"

"I don't know," the President said.

"Well, talk it over with your advisors. Talk it over with other leaders of the world. I'll be happy to join in the discussion, if you like. But it's going to have to be a human decision," Muriel said. "I think we're done here, sir. I'll be available when you come to some sort of decision, or when you want to discuss this further," she added, and she and all the squads translated back to their home Enclaves.

"You were hard on her, sir," Melanie said.

"No. Not really. She was hard on herself. She held both sides of the discussion. She KNEW that I wanted her to find a way out, and showed me that it wouldn't work," he said. "And the hell of it is that she did it in as gentle a way as she could. I was wrong. She still is that sweet little girl."

And back at Enclave, Ted asked, "How'd it go?"

"Next time, YOU go talk to him. Oh, here's the record, if you want to see what happened," Muriel said. "And how'd you get the other Enclaves to cough up squads to stand on the lawn?"

"I didn't. The word got out, and they all just did it. I think they like you," he replied.

"You know? Sometimes I hate this job. Oh, I'm not going to stop. But having to tell off a friend like that – well . . . I just don't like having to do that."

"I know. Not the same situation, but I was getting frustrated with the job. It all seemed so impossible once I got into it. And then I found you, and I found out what real frustration could be." He chuckled. "Go take a break, kid. Visit your parents, have dinner, get a good night's sleep. By morning, something will change, and we'll see what we can do to direct it a little."

Chapter 7

The Situation Changes (Wednesday)

Well, Ted was right, in a way. The situation changed. Muriel was actually surprised in the way it had changed. Iran was loudly and vituperatively expounding on the latest developments of the 'Great Satan'. They demanded their banks, people, and ship back, and blamed America and Home for having taken unlawful action against them. America and Home were accused of kidnapping, armed robbery, assault, and everything else that the President of Iran could think of. Basically, the President of Iran was saying that a state of war existed between Iran and the United States and Home. And they were doing it in front of the the UN General Assembly as well as on television.

"So, now they're saying that we started the war," Muriel said.

"You know, something similar happened with Germany, where the people were lied to and brainwashed into believing all sorts of nonsense," Ted said. "I don't think the UN is going to believe this any more than the other lies that Iran has fostered."

"Really?" she asked.

"Wait for it," he replied. And on the television:

The floor recognizes the distinguished Ambassador from France. And, through an interpreter, came:

Thank you, Mister Secretary General. I will try to be brief. The accusations of the representative of Iran are ludicrous. I have seen the evidence of the assault on the Enclaves of Home. I know who ordered the assaults, and how they were carried out. The President of Iran has just said that a state of war exists between Iran and Home. He's right. Such a state has existed since he ordered the car bombing of the Enclaves. An assault which failed, miserably, due to the abilities of the Envoys of Home. He claims that a state of war exists between Iran and the United States of America. He's right. He tried to kill a Senator by ordering missiles to strike him while he was in the American Enclave of Home. Again, the assault failed miserably. Since then, it has been shown that several banks and companies in several countries were actually owned by the government of Iran, in violation of the laws of those countries. That they funneled funds to terrorist organizations, helped organize them, and gave them orders on who to hit and when and how. I now call upon the nations of the world to order the arrest and conviction of the perpetrators of these crimes. And that the arrest should be taken as soon as possible, using the facilities and manpower of all the affected countries, including Home. This situation cannot and must not continue. No country has the right to assault another, or to attempt to kill its leaders. Thank you.

"Well, that put the cat among the canaries," Ted said. "We're going to be asked to go in

and bring them out.”

“Hmm. Yes. But it's not us bringing the action. Is the conference room in Guest House free for the next couple of days?” asked Muriel.

“I believe so. Why?”

“Because I think we should have a conference with all the Ambassadors to see how we'll go about it. Oh, not until we get formal notice from the UN, IF that happens. But, when it does, and depending on how it's worded, we need to decide how we're going to act,” Muriel said.

“Good point. Mind if I join in?” he asked.

“You, my friends, Melanie, Frank and Adam. EVERYBODY that's an Ambassador,” she replied. “We also need to decide if we're going to include Envoys in any action.”

“How could you leave them out?”

“Easy. This is a human action, taken by the United Nations through whatever countries sign on. We're added as one of the ones affected. But the reality is that there's only two nations that have the trained military to take on such a task, and they don't have the manpower. We do,” Muriel said. “And they know it. We're going to be asked to do it under all sorts of qualifications and limitations. And we're going to refuse.”

“WHAT?”

“We're going to refuse until they come to us and ASK how we can do it. That's why I need a conference with the Ambassadors. We need to decide what we can do, and what concessions we can make. We also need to find out what they're going to do with a country that has effectively been beheaded,” Muriel said.

“Oh. OK. Now I understand what you're doing. So, what is it that you want to do? Just pick them up?” he asked.

“No. We'll do this like a police action. We'll arrest them in the name of the United Nations, and confiscate all records and computers to search for further evidence,” she said. “I'm hoping we can use Envoys, too. And that every Enclave and Ambassador will join in. The Enclaves can be covered by recruits from Home. But the reason that I want control is because we'll locate everyone, and translate in and take them all at once. No brave marching in under fire or something stupid like that.”

“Hmm. I see what you mean. And there are those that would actually propose something like that 'because it's traditional'.”

“Yep. So, don't expect that it'll be all over, quickly. The planning stage of it will take much longer than the actual operation,” Muriel said.

“Well,” Ted replied, “it always does. When do you think you'll hear?”

“Probably not until tomorrow or the next day. They'll have to mull it over and let each country be heard sort of thing, first,” she said. “I think I'll go see what my friends are doing.”

“Mind if I come along?” asked Ted.

“Come ahead. It can't be any stranger than the time I walked in and they were flying paper airplanes,” she replied.

When they approached the offices of her friends, they found that they were all lined up outside their individual doors, facing the main door. “We're going,” Don said. “You're not leaving us out of it. We all decided, and you're outvoted. We're going.” And, indeed, they were in the fighting class 'A' uniforms that they usually wore on missions.

“I never said you weren't,” Muriel replied, puzzled.

“Well . . . you'd better not,” he said. “When people start car bombing and throwing missiles at us, it's time we did something.”

“I quite agree. We're just waiting for the various governments to come to the same conclusion.”

“Well . . . good. We just wanted to make sure you knew that we're not going to be left out of it,” he kinda ran down.

“You're not being left out of anything. I intend to take ALL Ambassadors. Or at least all those that wish to come,” Muriel said. “After all, all the Enclaves were affected by the car bombings. They should all have a part in seeing justice done.”

“I'm glad to hear that,” Melanie said. “Because we have a problem. There isn't any place we can take them for criminal action.”

“Oh, oh,” Ted said. “I can hear this one coming.”

“Oh, great,” Muriel said. “So, what am I supposed to do with them when I pick them up? Turn them over to the nations?”

“No. That's one thing they all agreed on. All of the countries are either conflicted in one way or another – mostly because Iran has managed to get sleeper agents into the countries and funded them to lobby in favor of things that would help Iran. Or they are unable to be unbiased because terrorist acts occurred within their national boundaries. They include the Enclave incidents because, though they were directed at the Enclaves the preparation was done in their country,” Melanie said.

“So, what DO I do with them?”

"Um . . . what do you do with people that break the law in the Enclaves?" asked Melanie.

"Well, since our only law is against breaking the peace, usually we just let the drunks sleep it off. For more serious situations, the people are escorted out and not allowed to return. WAIT A MINUTE! Are you trying to tell me that I'VE got to decide what to do with them?" Muriel demanded.

"Well, the major countries feel that you should be the one to pick them up," Melanie said, defensively.

"Uh, uh. Yea, I can pick up the top of the problem. But a lot of the lower ones are in other countries, including America, and should be picked up by that country's police," Muriel said. "And you still haven't given me any idea what to do with a headless country that's effectively defenseless."

"Um . . .," Melanie was becoming increasingly defensive. "They thought that, you know . . ."

"No, I can't pull a China on it. First of all, the citizens have been brainwashed into thinking that we and the training are evil. That means that, instead of the population deciding to become an Enclave, we'd be an occupying force. It won't work," Muriel said. "Second, it isn't the military that came after us, so it's still intact and mostly Shi'ite. Two days after we leave there'll be a military Shi'ite leader heading the country, and three months after that there'd be nuclear missiles flying everywhere."

"Oh."

"Then there's the problem of what to do with the prisoners. If I have the radical Shi'ites put to death then suddenly it's a unilateral action by the Leader of Home without recourse to Law and Tradition. Did you hear the capital letters slam into place, there? That's because there's so many people that BELIEVE that Law and Tradition need them because they're so holy. They'll ignore the fact that we have the evidence, and there's nothing they can do to defend themselves from that. When you're the one giving the orders, you can't very well plead that you were just following orders. And that defense is not a defense, anyway," Muriel said. "And I am not going to tie up Envoys OR humans taking care of a bunch of social retards that should have been spanked when they were children. Nope. NOT gonna happen. And that leaves out the most important reason why I'm throwing this back in their faces."

"What's that?"

"By doing what they suggest, going in and taking unilateral action and executing people on my own judgment of the situation, I'd become the Tyrant of Earth. Even if they never said it, they'd think it, and we'd never be able to train another person. Half of the population of earth would be looking to me to answer the tough decisions. The other half would be afraid of us. No. Absolutely not. I'm not buying this as a way out. So, are you man enough to go tell

them that? Or do I have to do it for you?"

Melanie's eyes blazed, as she drew herself up to deliver a blast back a Muriel. Then she stopped. "Wait a minute. It isn't me that you should be mad at. Dammit, I'm the messenger in this case, not the one that made the decision. Even the President isn't the one you want to be mad at. He told them pretty much the same thing."

"All right, then. I'm sorry," Muriel said. "You're right. I'm mad, and I shouldn't be mad at you. So, where are these 'fine upstanding citizens' that can't take a pee without someone holding their hand?"

"Oh, oh," Mata muttered, then sent, ::Squads, battle dress uniforms and be ready to move. Don, you'd better call Muriel's friends together and be ready in the fighting class 'A' uniforms. I think she's about to do serious damage to the leaders of the world. Have your troops in battle dress uniforms.::

"Um, they're still at the UN. Muriel, you aren't going to do anything drastic, are you?"

"Nobody will die. Somebody might wish they could. Mata, I want all for squads," Muriel said. Mata just pointed out front. And Muriel laughed.

"Muriel," Don said as she came through the door, "I told you you're not going anywhere without us. This is our fight, too. And we know what's going on, and you have every right to be angry. May I make a suggestion?" And he sent his proposed plan to her. And again she laughed, only this time it had an evil twinge to it. And they all translated out.

The General Assembly of the UN was still in session when a loud noise disturbed them. It was the sound of a casket lid slamming shut on the body of a criminal that echoed around that vast room. Accompanying that was the translation of twelve juveniles with their squads, ringing the area between the two sets of windows where the translators did their work and watched the proceedings.

Then there was another sound. The painfully grating, horrible sound of a large, 'weeping' bell, where the initial sound slid downward, harmonics and all, quivering as it went. It was enough to make those in the chamber think that the end of the world had occurred. Those seated on the dais quickly found some other place to be. The speaker's podium disappeared, as did the dais, desk and chairs. Four squads took up station on either side of the UN emblem.

"So, my children," came a voice that filled the entire room and needed no translation. "So, you would abdicate your responsibilities in favor of a new ruler. Is that what you want?" Muriel said, as she walked forward in the air, four times her normal size. "Would you have me make your decisions for you? Instead of gathering and discussing and voting, you would prefer to be told what you are to do, and have it enforced by me? Is that what you want?" The UN emblem suddenly changed to the Home logo, glowing golden and appearing to not even touch the wall. And under it, a new dais with a chair – a throne of sorts – mounted on it. "Shall I, then, take that chair and give orders to you? Ah, but I'm ahead of myself. First, a

small demonstration of what it would be like to live under the rule of an absolute tyrant that you couldn't threaten, couldn't kill, and couldn't discuss anything with."

"Where is he. Where is that abysmal pipsqueak that calls himself the President of Iran. Where is that loudmouth twerp that has decided for you that I should be your leader and take the blame for destroying a people? AH! There you are. Hiding in the bathroom. Come out, little jerk." Muriel gave him no option, lifting him out of the men's room and flying him to the front of the chamber. "I want you to take a message to your master," she said. And a large frame suddenly appeared next to her. On it were four chains anchored to the corners.

"You realize, don't you, that for attempting to assassinate the Leader of Home and her Ambassadors, your life is forfeit according to your religion? That I could have your head struck from your body. Would you like that to be the message that the Ayatollah gets? No? I didn't think so. Yet you have behaved in a criminal manner. There are no words you can give in your defense. I have the evidence of your wrongdoing, and so do the leaders of earth. So. You must be punished, like a naughty school child, before all those gathered here. Your shame will be known to the whole world, including your Supreme Leader. This much I will do. I will take it upon myself to administer that punishment so the whole world, including your own people, can see for itself just what it would be like to put me in charge as a ruler."

Suddenly, the man was chained in the rack, facing the assembled representatives of the countries of the world and naked. A leather strap appeared in Muriel's hand, and she reduced her size to only twice normal. "You have violated the laws of your religion by attempting to use force and violence to get those not of your faith to believe the way you do." And the belt lashed out, striking the man a slicing blow across the buttocks. And he screamed. "You have violated the laws of your faith by lying to the world and to your own people." Again the belt struck, and again he screamed. "You have created terrorist groups and trained and funded them in order to promote dissension in the world, thus defying the civilized behavior of the leaders of the world." Again the lash. Again the scream. And just as suddenly, he was on the floor, dressed as he had been, his wounds cauterized with salt. "Now, take my words to your master, little man. Tell him – Iran is sealed. No one in, no one out. I WILL come, and when I do there had better not be even one cleric or leader left that holds the rabid, radical belief that they have the right to lie to their people or attempt to force others to their will. That includes him. And you. Further, that goes for any radical, violent clerics of your faith, where ever they are in the world. It is finished."

The President of Iran, now weeping in anguish, was translated out to the office of the Ayatollah without fanfare. The rack was also gone, as was the belt. Muriel turned and faced the assemblage, back in her four-times-normal size and with eyes blazing black with red, glowing centers. "Now, it is your turn to decide. I am the Leader of Home. Not because I'm stronger than they are, or because I'm more charismatic. But because they chose me to lead them. I do not govern. I do not rule. I simply act, on my own and in my own way, and they have chosen to follow that way. They could easily choose another to follow." The Home logo disappeared, and in its place was the emblem of the United nations. The chair and dais disappeared and the original furniture resumed it's place. "You have a decision to make. Not whether I will be your ruler, but how to deal with the mess that your countries allowed to happen – Iran. I may help, if asked nicely and it can be shown to be in accordance with your

laws. You have some time to come to a GOOD solution to the problem, since Iran is cut off from the world right now. The solution you THOUGHT you had would have resulted in Iran no longer existing, it's people killed, and the very ground deadly to even a casual or accidental step over the line. I've given you the time to come up with a better solution." She, her friends, and all the Envoys translated out, immediately.

Melanie jumped her as soon as she appeared in her office. "I've got some questions to ask you, girl."

"Oh, not now, Melanie. Let me calm down a bit, first."

"NOW, girl. Where'd you get that bell sound. It was the most wickedly awful sound I've ever heard!"

"Oh. That. I Doppler-ed a bell sound and varied the speed. You know the effect that you get when you hear a siren come toward you, pass, and move away? Well, I started with it as if it were right by my ear when it was struck, and moving away fast, but at a variable speed. No big thing. I think I got the idea from a commercial, or maybe one of those cheap science fiction movies. It's a neat effect."

"Neat! I think it raised every hair on my body, and I wasn't even in the room with it. There's probably some serious cleanup necessary in that room, right now. And what about that coffin lid slamming?" asked Melanie.

"Oh, you'd have to ask Don. That was his doing. But I have an idea that he simply magnified and deepened the sound he uses in one of his presentations, then ran it through an echo chamber. Not that it needed much of an echo chamber in that barn," Muriel replied. "It definitely had a sense of finality about it."

"It sounded like two lead slabs slapped together," Melanie said.

"That was quite a show you put on," Ted said. "And I'm not complaining, but I would like to know your reasoning for the whipping."

"Simple. The whole reason that they tried to toss it back to me was because that little twerp had been agitating them. By dragging him up there and putting him in that whipping rack I showed him that I could find him, anywhere – he was hiding in the men's room, by the way – and that he was powerless to stop me. The whipping? It emphasized that he'd been lying all the time. To the world, which, for the most part, people had figured out. And to his own people. But mainly, I wanted that bearded snake in a cheap suit OUT of there. So, I publicly humiliated him and sent him back to the Ayatollah, literally. Right to the man, himself. And if the head of maintenance did what I think he did, it's playing on their national television in an endless loop, and nobody can get to the controls to stop it, and they can't block it."

"He did," Mata said, "He's gloating about it. He took the feed directly off one of our troops and fed it into the Iranian television system. Neatest trick I've seen in a long time. And your locking down the country and making that statement at the end, well, the clerics have no

place to go. Even the military is feeling ill used. Two days, maybe three. I expect that there's going to be religious bodies in the street just from the people."

"Do you really think so?" asked Muriel.

"Yea, I do," Mata replied. "You definitely put the fear of you into them. Seriously, I think the military will take over when all the blood is shed. I also think they'll be the ones to take out the Ayatollah and his advisors. But for the rest . . . I don't think there will be a Shi'ite cleric left alive in Iran, and they may even tear down the mosques as being polluted. We'll just have to wait and see."

Chapter 8

By the Pricking of My Thumbs (Thursday morning)

The President was already in Muriel's office when she came down from breakfast. "So, what can I do for you, today?" she asked.

"I need to talk to you," he said.

"Talk? Yes," she said. "Accuse, put down, holler at? You might as well leave now, because I'd just toss you out. I did what I did. Period. And I will not be chastised like some small child for having done it."

"No. Nothing like that. I've just gotten reports from my advisors. Iran is in turmoil. People are dragging clerics into the streets and beheading them. The Ayatollah is holed up in his office. The President's head is mounted on an iron rod outside the government building. No one is sure where the advisors are. It's bad, over there," he said.

"It's likely to get worse. That's what happens when you lie to people, especially about their religion. They tend to get testy," Muriel said.

"It's . . . it's happening in other countries, too. At least I think it is. Mullahs dead, mosques destroyed. Even here, a mosque in New York was torched. Total loss. One body inside. In Chicago, a cleric dragged through the streets behind a truck. Other countries are reporting in, too. What's happening," he asked.

"People. And rage. Trust me, when rage gets out of hand and has a valid target strange things can happen. And these people were lied to for a long time, and progressively. Suddenly, they found out that their religious leader was one of the ones doing the lying to them. Not only that, they've discovered that the reason Muslims have been painted as evil in other societies is BECAUSE of these clerics and what they're preaching. Most of these people can read. They know what's in their holy books. And some of them are smart enough to realize that one small passage doesn't take the place of all the other passages, and may not even be a properly qualified addition to the holy works. And they've just seen a man whipped for trying to kill someone – shamed beyond belief. Personally, I hope the police don't look too hard for the ones that have done this," she said.

"How can you say that? These people are murdering people."

"Is it murder when you put down a rabid dog? I'm not condoning what they're doing. But I AM understanding WHY they're doing it. Trust me, when I first learned how to make shields I was very tempted to REALLY attack those bullies at school. I wouldn't have killed them, but they'd have understood what it REALLY was to be bullied. I didn't. I pulled it back, because I understood that the more lasting shame to them would be for them to be totally

ineffective. You know what I'd be more interested in finding out about is what's happening in Afghanistan and Iraq. And Pakistan, come to think of it. But Afghanistan, mostly, with the Taliban. They've got to feel like there's a target on their backs."

"What if it slops over into the rest of society? What if they don't stop with their own clerics?" he asked.

"I don't have answers for you, Mister President. I tried to tell you before that I didn't. What I did in the UN was to get that little jerk OUT of there, so he was no longer confusing and agitating the rest. Even if he had lived, he'd have never been able to return to the UN. The shame would have been too great. One, he was stripped in front of them. Two, he was whipped for causes. Three, he was whipped by a woman, and helpless to stop it. A bare-faced woman in men's clothing. You can't even imagine the shame he must have felt. The pain was bad. The shame was ten times worse for him. But I'll bet it worked on the UN. They realized that they did NOT want a world ruler. They wanted someone with compassion and understanding. They wanted someone that could guide them, not force them."

"Well, they're certainly discussing it. And they're also looking at those representatives that have Enclaves in their country a little askance. Like they aren't sure that maybe THEIR Ambassadors would pull the same stunt on some one of them," he said.

"Won't happen. I'm the one that sets the policies, and they know it."

"But . . . what can I do?" he asked.

"Well, you could start prosecuting the ones from this country that we have locked up across the street, there," Muriel replied. "We've got enough evidence on them to put them away for a long time. Oh, not necessarily the front desk clerks. They really didn't know anything. But the officers of the banks, the traders, the ones that made the devices and the ones that ordered the hits."

"Yes. Melanie would know how to go about that, and who to put in charge," he said, straightening up. "Yes. That's at least something I can do. And it might show that there is a legal way of dealing with the problem, so people don't have to take matters into their own hands. OK, thanks," he said, and translated out.

"He's kidding, isn't he," said Mata.

"Nope. Just naive," Muriel replied. "He actually believes what he's saying. It's all right, Melanie will straighten him out."

"Oh, my," Mata said. "Look out the window." Approaching at a slow, dignified walk was what appeared to be a Mullah. "By the pricking of my thumbs . . ."

"Something wicked this way comes," Muriel automatically responded with the line from the Shakespeare play - the Scottish play. "Only, that's not necessarily the case. Let's see how it plays out." They both held their breath as he approached the door.

The door whooshed open as the man came close, but he did not pause until he was inside an close to Mata's desk. Then he held up one finger and turned to watch the door slowly close behind him. He smiled as he turned back.

"My compliments on having such a well trained door," he said, his hand over his heart and making slightly more than just a head bow.

"My compliments to you on not being the next victim of the door. It normally claims it's entrance fee from new arrivals by the shock and pause as they approach, sir," Mata returned with a smile and nod.

"My name is Aslam," he said, "that being my – what you would call – given name. Would it be possible for me to make an appointment with the Ambassador?"

"Entirely possible," Mata said. "Muriel? Are you busy?"

"Show him in, Mata. He intrigues me.

"Sir, if you'd come with me, please," and Mata took him to Muriel's casual area and indicated a seat. Muriel put away some papers, and came out from behind her desk to join him.

"May I offer you coffee or tea, milk or soda?" she asked.

"Coffee would be fine, if it's not too much trouble," he replied. "You ARE the young woman that put on that show at the UN, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am. Is that a problem?"

"Not to me as such. But for others, quite a problem. You seemed a bit larger on television," he said.

Muriel smiled at him and stood up. Then stood up again until her hair just touched the ceiling. She then resumed her normal size and re-seated herself. "It's a device. No, not something mechanical. Just a technique that those of us trained in the Envoy techniques can use. One of many techniques."

"Ah. You do it well," he replied.

The coffee arrived, then, in a large pot with small cups. "Muriel, this may be a bit stronger than you are used to," Chuck said. "Think of it as closer to espresso. Aslam is from a nation that respects good coffee, and it would be beneath us to offer anything less than Arabic coffee." He poured each a cup, then waited.

Aslam took a sip and smiled. "This is excellent, and you are to be commended, sir. You do not find it demeaning to serve a woman?"

“NO one here finds it demeaning. She was chosen by the Envoys of Home as their leader because of her quick mind and clear abilities. And because she was able to even teach Envoys,” Chuck said.

“Well said. Not everyone believes that women are inferior,” Aslam replied. “And how do you find it, young lady?”

“Strong. Unusual to me, but good. I think that it is something that I would take sparingly, though.”

“Yes, it is strong. This is quite an office. Do you ever have any Envoys come here?” he asked. And Muriel laughed.

“Mata, if you please?” Muriel said. Mata sighed and stood up. “She's always doing that to me. Ah well, the trials of a security chief. Aslam,” she said, attracting his attention. Then she grew some into an adult. Then she changed to male, and Aslam's eyes widened.

“What is this?” he asked.

“I am an Envoy. As is the man that served you. As are the rest of the people in this office – her security squads. You and Muriel are the only humans in this room,” Mata said, resuming her normal size and shape. “When I first met Muriel she was twelve years old, and needed someone that looked to be her age and gender. I was male appearing at the time, but since Envoys have no body, it was easy to accommodate her.”

“I see. I think,” he said, then turned back to Muriel. “So, a human woman is the leader of Home, and by the choice of the people of Home, the Envoys.”

“Yes. And without my even realizing that I'd been elevated to that position. From my point of view, being leader is just a matter of staying ahead of everyone that's chasing me,” she said, and Aslam laughed.

“That,” he said, “is the sort of statement that one who does not rule would make. And that reassures me, tremendously. I will be plain. I came to see what it would take to be trained.”

“Oh, that's simple. A little time, maybe a shock or two along the way. It all hinges on the ability to make mental contact with your trainer. There is a faster way that is still somewhat experimental that we've been trying. Oh, and as a trainee, you would have shelter, food, clothing, medical attention, basically anything you need. And that would continue even after you were trained. And it costs nothing,” Muriel said, back in her element.

“And you train anyone? Even enemies?” he asked.

“I've trained two Envoys that were black souled – well, call it evil. One is now the head of my analysis section, and the other is head of the hospice we have here in Enclave. And

both enjoy their work,” she said. “The rest of their groups could not be saved, and were killed, out of defense for all humans, since they threatened to destroy us.”

“And you ordered Envoys to do it?”

“No,” she said. “Envoys helped with one group. But Ted and I eliminated the group that Fred came from.”

“You kill?” he asked.

“I’m human. Which means I have the capability of killing other human beings. Or anything, for that matter. It’s a fact of life, like breathing. I am neither proud nor ashamed of the fact. I simply recognize it and deal with it, restricting it to only necessary situations,” she replied. “Envoys, on the other hand, can only kill under certain specific situations. And they don’t like to. Envoys are soul. Call it intelligent power if it makes you feel better. Humans are soul in a body.” And she waited. Her wait was rewarded by a gasp from Aslam, and some minutes of looking at his hands, and at her, and at their surroundings with very wide eyes.

“So,” he finally said. “Your experimental way seems to work.”

“Yes, I thought it might, from the way you asked questions and the care you took to not insult me,” Muriel replied. “We’ll run you through the formal training, since it covers the basics and ensures that you’re protected and have enough knowledge to be able to build on it. And to cover all the points necessary to show that you are fully trained. That includes a trip to Home and back, under your own power.”

“I understand what that means for me. Judgment. But who is the judge?”

“You are. The balance inside you,” she said. “But first, let’s get you protected. The shields you’ve got are too vulnerable.”

“You’re covered, Muriel,” Mata said. “The entire room has shields on him. So you can go ahead.” And Muriel did. First, showing him what they looked like on her, then walking him through making them. And finally, Don popped in and tested them.

“And why would a young man try to hit me with a baseball bat? AH! Testing to be sure they were strong enough,” Aslam said to himself.

“Yes, sir. I’m Don. Trainer, troublemaker and bat boy.”

“Hmm. Yes. I can see the second in you. But I think it’s the first that you really love. What do you train?”

“Oh, I train people in the Envoy techniques. I also teach history to elementary and middle school kids by showing them what it was like during the periods of time and various locations. It started out as Western civilization. But I’ve been expanding it to cover the rest of the world, too. Still working on finishing that up, though,” Don said. “When we finish getting

you trained, I'll be happy to show you some."

"I'd like that," Aslam replied. "So, what's next?"

"Clothing," Don said. "Which is the second reason I'm here. You wouldn't want a teen age girl teaching you how to make clothing, since the first requirement is for you to get undressed. Then translations, which is pretty much just familiarization for you, and the trip to Home and back. All in all, we should be done in about an hour. Maybe an hour and a half. Is there any place you need to be before then?"

"No, my wife is here. We checked into your Guest House before I came over. In fact, some young lady in white showed up just as I was leaving," Aslam said.

"Ah. That would be Fran," Don said. "A friend of mine."

"Really? Well, she introduced herself as a doctor, but one so young?"

"Our methods of teaching are somewhat advanced for those that are trained. Muriel and all of us that are her friends had at least one PhD when we were still twelve years old. Fran had four, all in medicine or medical related. And she saved a guy that had a heart attack in Muriel's office as her first major solo work. She's good," Don said, casually.

"And what would she say about you?"

Don's face colored. "I'm not sure. Why don't you ask her?"

Aslam looked at his young companion and smiled. "I'll do that. I think I'd like to better meet the young lady that has so captured you. And does she know how you feel?"

Don's color increased, and Aslam laughed. "There is nothing wrong with that, young man. Nor do I make fun of you. I, too, have been young. From the little I've seen, I would say that you are a very fortunate young man."

"I know it shouldn't affect me like that, but sometimes it does. Yes, she knows. And as soon as we are old enough according to American society, we'll be married. And I still wonder what she sees in me, but I'm not about to rock the boat by asking her," Don said. "This way, my office is just inside to the left."

"Don, can I see you a moment?"

"Sure, Fran. What's up? Oh, this is Aslam, and I'll be finishing up his training," Don said.

"Um"

"Ah. It is about my wife, and possibly me. And you're not sure how to proceed. Miss Fran, after the glowing report this young man gave of you, I don't think you will shock me,"

Aslam said.

“Very well,” Fran said, regaining her composure. “Why don't we go into my office. Don, I'll bring him over when I'm done.”

“OK. Oh, he's got shields. I was about to teach him the rest.”

“No problem. But thanks for the warning,” Fran said, and led the man to her casual area.

Chapter 9

A Nasty Visitor

(Thursday afternoon)

"Mister . . .," Fran began.

"Just Aslam, please."

"Very well. Aslam, my name is Fran," she said, holding out her hand. He took it, and she continued, "I'm a doctor, but not as you know them. I practice medicine using Envoy techniques. They are faster and more effective – and less invasive – than human techniques. Your wife had a nasty parasite."

"Yes, I know she does. That was one of the reasons we came here. I was told that it was possible that those with Envoy training could help her," he said.

"DID have. Past tense. She's no longer bothered with it. And neither are you, now."

"Just like that? No examination?" he asked.

"Just like that. And you were examined. My formally introducing myself was to get you to shake hands with me. That localized the problem and I corrected it. The parasite is gone," she replied. "I'd like to see her in a couple of days, though, to be sure that we got all the eggs or larva or whatever you might call them. The same with you, if you don't mind."

"Certainly. I'll see that she's here."

"Oh, nothing so formal. I can see her in your rooms just as easily. As with you, it's simply a matter of holding her hand for a minute. I don't know where you were when you made contact with the parasite, but for the time being I'd suggest foods prepared by Envoys. As you're in Guest House, that's easy," she said. "I'll let them know what needs to be done. Oh, nothing serious. Just some added nutrients to help build you back up."

"Now, I have another question to ask you," she said, shifting topics. "How would you feel about her being trained?"

"From what I can see, it would be a benefit to her," he replied.

"Good. Because, in the course of dealing with the parasite and talking with her, I inadvertently triggered the connection. So I finished training her while you were in talking with Muriel. Actually, this is a good thing, because once I'm sure you're both clean, you'll never be bothered by such parasites again, no matter where you go or what you eat. The power and your shields will keep them out, as well as strengthen your bodies," she said.

"I can see why your young man is so impressed with you. May I ask, how did you know to go see her?"

"Oh, that. I could feel her distress," she said.

"From here, in your office?"

"Oh, no. Actually I was on the other side of Enclave, putting a bandage on a skinned knee that no longer needed a bandage. But children expect them, and it makes them feel better," she said, smiling. "So, now that the formalities are over, I'll take you over to Don's office."

"Just out of curiosity, you understand, how do you feel about your young man?"

Fran sighed. "He has a talent that is hard to believe, even when you see it in action. He is far more intelligent than he lets on, and I think he has about six PhDs, now. I don't know for sure because he just doesn't talk about it. I don't deserve him, but he seems to like my attention. And that's enough for me."

"Interesting. And your work and his being so different, that doesn't cause a problem?" he asked.

"Oh, no. He's very supportive, even when I get called out at night." Suddenly she realized what she had said, and her light brown facial skin darkened. Aslam just laughed.

"Religions might look askance at that statement, but I understand. Just be careful. Yes, you two are well suited to each other. And I feel blessed to have met you both," he said. "Now, I suppose I should complete my training, then assure my wife that I'm not upset that she beat me in getting it."

Don met the smiling pair at his door. "All set? Good. Now, unlike Muriel, I only have one squad, and they split their time between being on duty and off. So, I'm going to chase all but one Envoy out of the break room, and we'll curtain it off. The reason for having one is that he can duplicate your size and shape, and show you what your clothes look like from the standpoint of somebody else. That will give you the image of how they look, so you can create your own. They're just shields that look and feel like cloth."

"You meant it when you said I'd make my own clothes," Aslam said, smiling.

"You bet," Don replied, and they went to work. It was an hour later when they were finally done with clothes, translation around earth, and translation to and from Home. Everything had been successful, and Aslam had received his stripes and passport.

"Did my wife get one of these, too?" he asked.

"Was she trained?" Don asked.

"Yes, your girlfriend trained her," Aslam said.

"Then she would have gotten a passport, too. They really don't mean very much, since there's no customs between earth and Home. But they serve as a reminder that you've been there and can go back anytime," Don said.

"You know, this changes everything for me. I've spent my life trying to do the will of Allah. Now, I find there's no one there," Aslam said, reflectively.

"Not no one. YOU are there. You have the balance to help keep you straight. You know when you cause someone pain. Some people call it the 'knowledge of good and evil'. But it's actually subtler than that. Things aren't black and white. But the balance can help you navigate through the mine fields of choices," Don said. "Actually, you should be talking to Tommy about this."

"Tommy? Another kid?"

"Yea, another of Muriel's friends. He used to kid that he wouldn't use the name Thomas, because everyone would doubt him. So what did he end up studying? Philosophy and religions," Don said. Aslam laughed.

"So he really did end up doubting. Are all you kids like this?" he asked.

Don shook his head. "Oh, we're all crazy, in a way. But we all go our own way, and we're all serious about it. We've got quite a wild cross section of disciplines, here. And we're all Ambassadors, so we use that as a way to reach other people and show them that Envoy trained people aren't ogres."

"And you do it with history," Aslam said.

"Yea. OH! I was going to show you some, if you have time," Don said.

"Time I have, young man. And I'd like to see how you manage to teach elementary and middle school children something complicated like history."

"By making it MORE complicated, of course," said Don, laughing. "This will take about an hour, and I'll run you through it just the way I would them."

It ended up taking an hour and a half, but that was because Aslam had more experience to base things on, and asked better questions than the kids did. The first thing that Aslam noticed was that Don was showing history from the standpoint of people of various classes. The next was that Don was showing the interlinking of disciplines – how politics affected religion, affected science and math, affected music and art. When Don had said that he'd made it more complicated, he wasn't kidding.

"Whew," Aslam said, as Don shut down the presentation. "These should be in college! How many of them do you have?"

"Hmm. Good question. I haven't really counted. And, of course, they keep getting upgraded as I go along. Betty would know," Don said.

"Another friend?"

"Oh, no. She's an Envoy – head of one of Muriel's squads. The squad that took on the task of getting her up to and beyond her grade level when she first came out here. The whole squad took to it so well that they pushed us through high school, then into PhD courses at the age of twelve. Some of them are strictly Envoy technique courses, like Engineering and Medicine. Others, like history, are pretty much the same as what is taught in college. She's got all my presentations, though," Don said. "They're available to anyone that can make a mental link. And anyone that can make the link and wants to use them to teach is welcome to them."

"Would she be interested in something like this, but directed more towards religion?" asked Aslam. "I'm not talking about trying to convert people. I'm trying to show what shaped it in its various forms, and why some went wrong."

"She might. We'd have to ask her. It sounds like you're talking about a form of history as it affected religions – shifting the focus some," Don said.

"Yes. And not just Islam, but all the ones I know about."

"Yes, I think she'd be interested in adding them to the mix. It certainly wouldn't hurt to ask. Hold on," Don said, then sent, ::Betty, have you got a moment?::

"For my favorite professor? Of course. What's up, Don?" she asked.

"This is Aslam. He's just received the training, and I showed him one of my presentations. He was wondering if you'd be interested in a history focused on religions – plural – that would show how they developed and why some of them went wrong," Don explained.

"Definitely. Muriel may have to add another office, though. That's a big subject to tackle," Betty said. "Oh, it's not a problem setting up another office. Even an apartment over it for you and your wife. I was thinking more from your standpoint. Don has spent years coming up with these ideas, working with Jeff and others on how to create them and make them realistic and true to history. It isn't something that you just knock out in a day."

"Yes, I can see that. And I still think it would be of value. You know, I didn't really come here looking for a job. I came to try to find a cure for my wife," Aslam said.

"Ah, well . . . it never is the first thing you talk about, is it," said Betty. "Why don't we go talk to Muriel. You can bring your wife, you know. She knows how to translate, now, and you can reach her mentally. I'm sure Muriel would love to meet her."

"Then, I will ask her." ::Dear, would you like to meet our hostess and some friends?:: he sent, and sent an image of the front of Don's office. In moments, she was there. Unlike her husband who wore robes befitting his office, she wore a plain, long skirt and blouse, with a jacket that matched the skirt. Out of deference to her religion she wore a head cloth to cover her hair.

Fran had been attracted by the activity, and had joined Don and Betty. And Aslam introduced them all. Then they walked around to Muriel's office. Aslam's wife never hesitated at the door, but continued on beside her husband as if nothing had happened. The whoosh door had failed, again, to claim a victim.

"Mata," Muriel said. "That's two that have failed to hesitate when the doors opened. I think we're losing our touch. Should we install a siren, or something? Maybe a cannon going off." Mata just laughed, and directed the group to Muriel casual area.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen. And you, too, Don. What can I do for you?" Muriel asked.

"Aslam is thinking of changing careers. He'd like to do with religion what I did with history. Well, actually, it's the history of religion and how it changed, and stuff like that. And showing the periods of time that the changes occurred," Don said.

"Aslam? Are you sure you want to do this? That's a pretty big project."

"I saw what your friend Don did with history. That's impressive, and really gives a feel for the period of time and what affected what. Yes, I think it might help people to understand where religion came from and how it got warped," he said.

"Well! You'll need an office, of course. We'd be happy to set you up with one. How about Envoys to help you? And we could do what they did for me, and put an apartment above it, that would give you privacy and still be near where you need to be," Muriel said. "You would, of course, be on the payroll from Home, so you wouldn't have to worry about money. Oh, and if we set you up in an Enclave, then you wouldn't even have to worry about touching the salary. Since your food, shelter – well, we covered that – medical and anything else in Enclave would be free to you."

"But . . . how can you afford to do that?" Aslam asked.

"Oh, it doesn't cost us anything but a little time," Muriel said. "I would have to change your passport a bit, though, and put the word 'Diplomat' on it. Working in that capacity, you'd be an Ambassador."

"You're serious!"

"Of course. We hire all sorts of people to do all sorts of jobs. And not just here, but in any of the Enclaves. Unfortunately, there aren't any in any of the countries that have a predominantly Muslim religion. Well, I'm sure you've heard what we've been called," Muriel

said. "Usually, we end up finding people that are perfectly capable in their field, but can't find work. In your case, sure, you're perfectly capable, but you're going outside your career field. That's fine. You're intelligent, and we have the resources to help you. And you come with a good proposition. No reason why we can't accommodate that."

"I don't believe this!" he said. His wife touched his sleeve, and when he looked, she nodded to him. "OK, OK. Whatever you say. I'll even try to convince others that follow the will of Allah that you're not monsters. You're not, of course, but they've been told that you are."

"Good," Muriel said. "So all that's left is to see about your office and apartment. Why don't you relax for the rest of the day, and I'll get with a friend and see if she can come up with some ideas for you. Don, Carla will probably pull on you, too. Aslam, think about what you'd like for an office and an apartment, and we'll pick this up tomorrow morning. OK?"

As they left, Muriel could hear Aslam asking Don, "Is she always like this? So fast?"

"Yep," Don said.

::Carla, are you busy?:: Muriel sent.

"Nope," she said. "Gonna do it right this time, huh?"

"Quiet, girl. I've got work for you," Muriel said.

"I heard. I think the whole of Enclave and Home heard. Do you realize what a blockbuster this is? You just ruined a man's religious beliefs, and gave him something to replace that," Carla said.

"I had to. Believe it or not, I'm not out to destroy a person's faith. Yes, he's discovered the truth, and I think he took it pretty well. But, I'd rather have him here, where we can help him, than back where he was wondering what to do now," Muriel said.

"Well, you've got a point there. OK, same size squad as Don?" asked Carla

"Well, for right now."

"OK, we'll make it flexible," Carla said. "The Envoys managed to do that with yours, so we'll see what we can do for him. Trouble is, I don't know what kind of person – what kind of worker – he is. So I'll come up with three or four floor plans, and then play modify and mix and match from there. As for the apartment, some of that is going to depend on the physical size of the office below it. But a lot more is going to depend on what they want, and whether they want his squad to also do his housework. Housework! Oh, GAD! Do we know what his wife does?"

"No. Unless she told Fran. I got the impression that she was a stay at home person," Muriel said.

"I don't think so. She was wearing a Western style suit. OK, I'll have to see what I can find out, there. If I know Mata, she's already getting Envoys lined up to help him," Muriel said.

"Too late. Already gotten. And the leader's a go-getter. He's already meeting with Aslam and getting some of the information that you need. He struck up a conversation in the registration area of Guest House, and now they're all in the restaurant. That guy is slick," Mata said. "I'm glad he's not trying to get information from me."

"So, now all we do is wait for tomorrow," Muriel said.

Chapter 10

A New Friend (Friday)

“Good morning, Aslam,” Muriel said as he walked into her office.

“Good morning to you, too.” he replied. “I met someone after I left you, yesterday. He seems quite knowledgeable, and I'd like to include him in the discussion of my office, if I may.”

“Of course you may. Say, you never told me how you kept from pausing when the doors whooshed open.”

“Oh, that. One of your Science Fiction authors, Arthur C. Clarke, said something once that has kept me from stumbling over things I don't know. If I remember right, he said, 'Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic'. So, when the doors whooshed I just presumed that it was magic and kept going,” he said, and Muriel laughed.

“OK, you got me. But it's actually done by good engineering. Compressed air drives the doors open. They're closed by motors, which re-compresses the air. Any loss is topped off when the doors are closed,” she replied. “But you never flinched, hesitated, paused or anything!”

“Oh, that. Practice at just going on as if nothing untoward had happened. Part of the image of a Mullah. We're supposed to be unflappable,” he said, chuckling. “You might say it's our own sort of magic.”

“Your wife managed the same thing. Did you tell her about it?” Muriel asked.

“Where do you think I learned it from? She's better at it than I am, of course. Very quick, mentally,” he added.

An Envoy approached the doors and entered without pausing. Mata didn't even greet him, beyond grinning at him. She just pointed to Muriel's office, and he walked in.

“Hello, Aslam. Hello Muriel,” he said.

“Hello, Ken,” Aslam said. “You KNOW Muriel?”

“Everybody knows the Leader of Home,” Ken said. “However, I think I have a confession to make to you. My meeting you yesterday was no accident. When Mata asked for volunteers to fill a squad for you, I was happy to oblige. I'm a bit of a history buff, and I've seen the stuff that Don turns out. Well, since I had a leg up, so to speak, the rest of the squad appointed me the leader. So I thought I'd feel you out and see what you wanted for an office and such. Carla's got the plans, now, and should be over soon with them.”

"You're my squad leader?"

"Yep. Well, security chief. We security chiefs have a reputation to maintain. We all try to emulate Mata and the way she deals with Muriel. Just like all the Ambassadors try to emulate Muriel and the way she deals with the world. Security chiefs have to be on their toes and a jump ahead of their principal. It would be enough to give me a headache, if I had a real head," Ken said. And Aslam started laughing.

"Ken," he finally said, when he calmed down, "my wife was afraid that you were pumping me for information in order to try to steal my identity, or something."

"No, nothing like that," Ken said. "I just had to get a lot of information in a short period of time so Carla could get started on designing your office. Things you like, things you don't like, organization, things like that. And your squad is split up between Don's and Jeff's squads, finding out about how Don puts the things together, and how Jeff engineered and programmed it. Pretty neat, to tell you the truth. Oh, and Don's already said that you're welcome to any of the period pieces he has done, if they'll help in developing your idea."

"Wow! So fast," Aslam said.

"Now you know how I'm able to act as fast as I can. Mata's got everything organized for me ahead of time," Muriel said, laughing.

"Carla's coming. And Aslam's wife is with her. And they're laughing," Mata said.

"Oh, dear. That probably means that I'm in trouble," Aslam said.

"Hello, dear. Carla and I have the apartment all figured out," his wife said.

"Yep," Aslam said. "I'm in trouble."

"Oh, nothing like that," Carla said. "She just felt that, since you'd have a place to work, that she should, too. So, she has her office right in the apartment."

"We're going to have servants, dear. And no, they won't get in the way or invade our privacy. But the apartment will always be clean, and we'll always have good meals," his wife said.

"You see how it is? Women take over your life," Aslam said. Ted had walked in, just before that statement, and started laughing.

"You don't know the half of it, Aslam," he said. "Even twelve year old girls can take over your life. Muriel ran me ragged that first year."

"Aw, poor Ted. Overworked and underpaid. Nobody loves you," Muriel said.

"Quiet, woman. Have some respect for your elders," he replied.

"Hmm, yes, I should. What is it, now? Forty years? Fifty?" she asked. Ted just growled. And the rest laughed.

"Actually, I came in to give you an update. The bank tellers had no idea of what was going on. They've been released, and Caleb's crew is working with them to be sure that they aren't hurt by this. That's a good man, Caleb. Understands the other side of problems, and takes action. Any way, the rest are being moved out and into Federal courts, starting from the top, down," Ted said. "So far, only three have plead 'not guilty', even in the face of all the evidence against them. The rest should be cleared out Monday or Tuesday. And yes, someone tried to tamper with the evidence. Since we hold the originals, they were out of luck with their attempt."

"Now," he continued, "Iran. It's a mess. But, from what we can see, there isn't a radical cleric left alive. And they were nasty. They burned the bodies in one huge pile, then shoveled the ashes into a common pit and poured lime over them. The military tried to take over, as was expected. One man went up to the highest officer, the one that was trying to make himself a dictator, and gave him thirty seconds to clear the building, then walked out. Nothing more was said. As soon as the man was out, the building collapsed. It would seem that, among the disenfranchised of the population, there were a significant number of demolition experts. They imploded it around the military. So, now the military is a headless organism, being ruled by civilians. This just keeps getting more and more interesting," he concluded.

"Is there anything we can do to help the people?" asked Muriel.

"Caleb's on it. He's got a crew going in to check the infrastructure, and make sure the utilities are working. He's also directed them to hand out food and clothing where necessary. NO recruitment. However, his crew will be on the lookout for terrorist cells, and will be bringing them out for the new regime to deal with," Ted said.

"Why no recruitment?" asked Aslam.

"Because they won't accept it. Oh, it's possible that a few might, and we'll give them the opportunity, if they recognize that it's Envoys that are helping them. But we won't mention it or offer it," Ted said.

"Have this Caleb suggest that they go to the poorest areas first, then. They might be more inclined to go for the training," Aslam said. "I know it seems counter to what you would think. You'd think the poorest would be the most conservative. But they're really not. They're too busy just trying to stay alive. It's the small middle class that was recruited into the terrorists, particularly to be used as suicide bombs."

"I'll let him know. Is that why you want to explain religion?" asked Ted.

"Yes. It was warped in Iran. People need to understand that. Especially people

outside of Islam, who have a hard time understanding us – them – anyway,” Aslam replied.

“Well, I can't guarantee that it will work,” Ted said, “but it's certainly worth a shot. And we'll give you all the help and support you need to make the try. I'd like people to understand that religion is man-made, and a choice that they can make. We really don't care what people believe, religiously, as long as they don't try to force it onto other people.”

“Is there any good to religion?” asked Aslam.

“YOU ask this? Well, maybe that isn't so surprising,” Muriel said. “Yes, there is some good to religion. For those that can't take their ethics straight, it gives them reasons to behave in an ethical manner. It's a guide for them.”

“Then you've given me another reason to do this project. To show where religion is good for some, and unnecessary for others,” Aslam said.

“Well,” said Carla, “this isn't getting this poor, abused, picked on male to his new office.”

“WHAT! It's already done? Don't I get a say in it?” asked Aslam.

“Of COURSE you do, dear,” his wife replied. “All that time you talked to Ken.”

“Anything can be changed, Aslam,” Carla said. “But, based on what Ken told me and what your wife told me, I think it will be at least close.”

She stood up and headed for the door, followed by Aslam's wife. Aslam quickly followed, with Ken. And Ted and Muriel brought up the end of the procession. From outside, it looked much like Ted's office, with the exception that, like Anna, he had a back wall to his formal area, and the desk was in at an angle. In a sense, it made sense to do it that way, as it made a larger area for casual conferences.

Also, like Dave, Anna and Chun, the 'active duty' desks were facing Aslam's office rather than the windows. Behind was the biggest change, though. A large, blank area where the presentations could be created. Don made due without such, but he wasn't about to demand a larger space, as it would move him away from Fran, across the hall. Then, behind this space was the break room, complete with kitchen and restrooms. No elevator or stairs led to the second floor.

The walls appeared to be a light colored stone, with the carved geometric figures seen in Arabic architecture. The effect made the room look larger. And lighter. The furniture was all ornately carved of a medium dark wood.

“You WILL let us know if you need more room or more squads, or both,” Muriel commanded. “There's only one excuse for putting up with too small a room, and I'll be talking to Don about that. We can always break BOTH he and Fran out of the office the kids have. She needs it as much as he does,” she added, in disgust.

"OK, troops, it's time to go upstairs. Aslam, is there any problem with their seeing it before it's occupied?" Carla asked.

"No, of course not," he said.

"Good." And Carla translated all of them up to the apartment.

This was so unlike Muriel's that it made her gasp. The front was the living room. Behind it was the television/movie viewing area. And behind that was the dining room and kitchen. The kitchen placed on the side rather than at the back of the building. All the way back was the bedroom. And, in between was a walled off area that held Aslam's wife's office and the bathroom, creating a hall to the bedroom. In it was a large screen monitor, mounted to the wall, a desk and computer, and a long, soft couch that could serve as an area for her to take naps. The theme from downstairs was throughout the apartment, varied with carved wood panels that blended into the walls of the office. The office was a cozy place, and more feminine than the rest of the apartment.

"Well, Aslam? What do you think?" asked Carla.

"Good. Quite good. The office, especially. And I'm sure that my wife will include touches up here as we go along," he said. "Of course, in time we may need to expand it."

"That can be arranged," Carla said. "But that's for the future. We've got time to do that right. This place is private, and secure. The only way in or out is by translation, and you control who can translate in, and when. Right now, the only two allowed up here are the maid and cook, and I'll let you set up the schedule with them. The kitchen is fully stocked – your wife gave me specifics on what foods and drinks to include, so you don't need to feel that there's anything here that would be objectionable to you."

"But, where do the squad members sleep?" Aslam asked.

"Envoys don't sleep. They do take down-time, which is what the break room is for. And you needn't worry about noise either way, as the whole thing is sound baffled to keep sounds localized between the floors," Carla said. "And the break room has extra recliners to allow for the two extra Envoys. There's even a chair for you, so that you can take a break and relax without disturbing your wife."

"And you did this all in just a couple of hours?"

"Oh, no. Nothing so long. We've done this enough that getting the shell up was nothing. And the office and apartment took only about fifteen minutes, each," Carla said, and translated them back to the office. "I've removed my key to the apartment, now, so only you and those you authorize will be able to translate up there. But please, if you need any changes, feel free to call me. I want to make this right for you."

"She's not kidding," Muriel said. "Anna, in Russia, was much harder, making changes

as she went through. Fortunately, not many. And Carla either fixed things or had them fixed on the spot.”

“Well, I think I'd better get with Ken and find out what I need to know. If you all will excuse me,” Aslam said.

“And I should go to the apartment and see what's needed and what I can do,” said his wife, with a little bow.

Muriel, Carla and the rest left to let them get to work. As they got out of sight of Aslam's office, Carla touched Muriel's sleeve and said, “Don't let Aslam's wife fool you. She may actually be more intelligent than he is, and her shrinking violet manner is a pose. She's actually very aggressive, when it suits her, and a very strong person. I went to her to talk about the apartment. SHE told me what Aslam would like as an office. Ken confirmed it. But she already knew, based simply on knowing his work habits and what he was trying to do.”

“You're saying that he won't change anything?” Muriel asked.

“On the contrary. It's built in. She knows exactly what he'll change, and why. And had those things put in so that he COULD have something to change,” Carla said.

“Ooo. NASTY! Now I see what you mean. Almost like treating him like a child.”

“Definitely,” said Carla. “Don't get me wrong. She loves him and respects him. But she also knows how to lead him. It's why they happened to be in America when everything went down. She saw the way the wind was blowing, and suggested that she really needed to visit relatives, here. The car bombing came just after they arrived.”

“Hmm. I think I'm going to have to talk to her some more,” Muriel said. “But I'll let it wait a bit, until they're both comfortable with their new place.”

“Good idea,” Carla replied.

Chapter 11

Legal Matters

(Saturday morning)

"Muriel, one thing we never really talked about was the warranty on the cars," Jeff said, sitting across from her in her casual area.

"No need. If it breaks, we fix it. If it's a unique break, or if it can't be fixed, we replace it. All they have to do is show that they own the car," she said. "Why? Somebody break one?"

"Well, it's not working, and we don't know why," said Jeff.

"Replace it, then. Make sure all their personal stuff is out, and trade one for the other. All your dealers can transfer plates, can't they?" she asked.

"As far as I know. At least they have been doing so, within the laws of the states. Some states require time to make the change, and we supply temporary plates to get people back on the road," he said. "But the dealers are saying that they'd lose money just replacing a car."

"Want me to talk to them? Melanie's coming in in a bit, but we could probably fit in the CEO and CFO of the dealerships that object to our policy," Muriel said.

"I'd rather talk to them myself, first, I think. I hate having to throw trump at them right off the bat," he said.

"I understand. It lessens your ability to 'be the boss' – to do YOUR job – if you constantly have to call on me to straighten them out. OK, here's a page from the owner's manual that is supposed to be with all the cars, and it states our stance plainly. Take this back to them and show it to them," she said, handing him a piece of paper.

As Jeff left, Melanie came in and sat down. "I can see it's going to be a long day," said Muriel.

"Perhaps longer than you think. We're pulling the last of your prisoners out, today. However, we need proof of their wrongdoing, including chain of custody for any evidence," Melanie said. "Oh, and good morning to you, too," she added with a grin.

Muriel grinned back, "OK, you got me. So, what do you need?"

"Mostly, we need the linkage between people and evidence, and the chain of custody from the time it was found to the time we took control of it. The kicker is," Melanie said with disgust, "that the defense has flat out said that Envoys can not be considered witnesses or in

the line of the chain of evidence. Their stand is that, since they can't be prosecuted for lying under oath, that they can't be held responsible for their actions. So, we have to go over all the chain of evidence and show that a human was involved at each step. That includes the depositions and confessions that were made."

"OUCH! Wait a minute, though. Your guys are all human, aren't the?" asked Muriel.

"Yep. Why?"

"As I recall, we set it up that our guys would simply physically secure the evidence until one of your guys showed up, at which time YOUR guy would note it and translate it to our warehouse. Isn't that right?" asked Muriel.

"Well, yes. But the defense is saying that there had to be somebody on the receiving end to receive it," Melanie replied.

"BULL! He's scamming you. He knows nothing about translation or about our setup in the prison warehouse. He's guessing. Your guys signed the chain of evidence on everything. Your guys shipped everything to the warehouse, and your guys were the ones to open the sealed containers, with photographs to show that they hadn't been tampered with."

"Yes, and that's exactly the point at which they're saying that the evidence was tampered with," Melanie said.

"How?"

"They're saying that my guys turned the evidence over to your Envoys where you 'supposedly' found connections with terrorists and/or with top political figures in Iran." And Muriel laughed.

"First, as to the accusation that Envoys can't be trusted, you've got a whole file cabinet of evidence to the contrary. And by that I mean Federal cases that have accepted Envoy records as true and factual accounts of what happened. You've also got records from both the Envoys and your guys that show what happened on the raid. So, that's blown. Second, do you have something with you that I haven't seen, and that Envoys haven't had access to, physically or mentally?" asked Muriel.

"Well, yes, I suppose so. Why?"

"Because I'll show you how your guys 'turned over evidence' to Envoys. Get it out, but don't show it to me." Melanie did, while Muriel asked, "Fred, can I borrow one of your squad for a minute?"

"Sure, Muriel," he said, and directed one Envoy woman to go to Muriel's casual area.

"OK, here's how it works, if your guys didn't tell you. But the record will confirm it," she said to Melanie. "I want you to hold up the paper and count off three seconds, then put it

down. That's all."

Melanie did as requested. The Envoy looked at it and smiled. Then Melanie put it back down. And the Envoy recited everything that was on the page, word for word, which amazed, amused, and embarrassed the heck out of Melanie. It was a shopping list of sorts. Notes on underclothes that she wanted to see, in order to make them herself.

"The evidence never left the hands of your people, Melanie," Muriel said. "You pull that demonstration for the judge, and it's open and shut. Just make sure that the judge chooses something that you've never seen, have HIM hold it up for three seconds, then have him confirm what the Envoy recites back. Then have the attorney sanctioned for making spurious comments and accusations to attempt to deflect from the facts of the case."

"He's also saying that you did some sort of mind trick to get the confessions," Melanie said.

"Mind tricks, huh? Have your attorney suggest that the defense attorney has been watching too many movies from the 1980's and 1990's. I think you know which ones I mean, involving 'mind tricks'," Muriel said, and Melanie broke up laughing. "And I want a copy of the transcript of the hearing. I want to see what the judge has to say about that." And Melanie laughed even harder, shaking her head, and finally her finger at Muriel.

"You are a BAD, BAD girl, Muriel White, Madam Ambassador," Melanie finally said when she'd gotten herself back under control.

Meanwhile, Jeff had returned with two men that looked very disgruntled. "Mata, these gentlemen would like to see . . ."

"I can speak for myself, you young pup," said the first man. "Young lady, where's your mother."

"I beg your pardon?" asked Mata.

"You're obviously too young to be in charge of an office like this. So, where's your mother?" he demanded again. "I intend to see the Ambassador, immediately. Have your mother show me in to him."

"I see," Mata said, and stood up. "Jeff, I see we have another one that can't read and understand. Now, sir, would you rather deal politely with me," she said. "Or perhaps this is more to your liking," she said and changed to an adult female. "Or, of course, there's always this," and she changed again into a six foot five inch tall candidate for a professional football team, that leaned on the desk and growled, "WELL?"

"What is this? What kind of tricks are you trying to play on me?" he demanded as Mata resumed her normal look and sat down.

"No tricks. You've just tried to bull your way past an Envoy that happens to be the

security chief for the Leader of Home. And, by the way, since you didn't take the time to read the name on the window, the Ambassador is a woman named Muriel, and she's currently busy. Oh, and one other thing. I don't have a mother. Envoys don't have such things. Now sit down and wait until Muriel's through with her conference," Mata said.

"What do you mean, conference, If you mean those two in there, they're just having a gab session. Why, I can see them laughing. You can't tell me that's a conference," he said.

"Much higher level conference than you think, and more important to the nation than whatever you think you have to say to Muriel," Mata replied.

Jeff said, "I'm sorry about this, Mata. I'm afraid he's a bit headstrong."

"Hmm. Yes. And if he tries it with Muriel he'll be fired. Maybe you should have your squad escort him back when she's through chewing him up and spitting him out."

"I'll do that, Mata. Mata, can I ask? I thought that Muriel had to vet any CEO's of our companies," Jeff said.

"She did. But things were going on at that time, so she didn't get to do a personal interview," Mata said. "There were a few around that time that managed to slip through. OK, it looks like it's breaking up. I'll announce you."

"Harrumph!" growled the CEO, "I can do that for myself." Whereupon he promptly made an ass of himself, again. "Madam Ambassador, I demand that you tell this pipsqueak kid that you don't go giving cars away for free."

Melanie, who he'd mistakenly addressed, simply looked steadily at him for a moment, then pulled out her identification. "My name is Melanie Carter," she said, displaying her badge and identification. "As you can see I'm a Secret Service office. I also happen to be the National Security Advisor to the President. Now, was there something of earth-shaking importance to national security that you wished to speak to me about?" And Muriel snickered.

"Mister, you haven't been making points at all, today, have you," Muriel asked. "When I see Mata stand up and change, and all the way to male this time, I note, then I know she's got a dunderhead in front of her. Then you prove it by thinking Melanie was me."

"Oh, don't stop there, Muriel," Mata said. "He also thought that you were a man."

"Ah, well that explains why Jeff had to bring you. He showed you the page from the owner's manual, and you couldn't read and understand it any better than you could read and understand the words on my window. Well, I don't think this even warrants having you sit down to discuss it. Home owns the company that you've been in charge of. And I am the Leader of Home. And you? Well . . . you're fired. And so is your silent friend," Muriel said. "However, I will answer this for you. You were not out anything by giving away a car. If anybody was, it was Home. And since I'm the leader of Home and set up the rules for the company, well, I guess that means that I was willing to lose a little money in order to keep our

reputation secure. Jeff, I'm sending them back to clean out there stuff and turn in their keys and cards with one of my squads. Mata?"

"Yep. Squad one's on deck," she replied, and two Envoy men and two Envoy women grabbed the two men and translated out.

When they were gone, Muriel busted up laughing. Jeff looked worried, and Melanie looked amused. It took a minute for Muriel to stop laughing.

"Oh, Jeff!" she said. "Don't look so serious. You did nothing wrong. On the contrary, you did everything right. Come on in, and I'll tell you why."

"Can I sit in on this?" Melanie asked. "I somehow think I'm going to get a real object lesson in how to be a thorough-going bastard. And sometimes I need that."

"Sure. Grab a seat. What will people have?" When they were finally seated with coffee and sodas, Muriel said, "First, you came to me and laid out the problem. So I was prepared for it to happen. And you went back and tried. Very good. Now, from that point on, there were two ways for you to go. But you only knew one of them. I just showed you the second way. In fact, I don't think I ever gave you the authority to use the second way, and that's MY oversight, not yours. From now on, you have the authority to fire anybody in any of the car companies that you are in charge of."

"What?"

"Really! I should have given you that before, and shown you how to play that card. Well, you've seen how it's played, now. You don't take anything from people that work for you. They either work for you or they're out," Muriel said. "Now, as to why I used my squad instead of yours – the secretaries know what the gray uniforms mean. And they know that if I've had a hand in it and sent them back to clean out their desks – and you can be sure that my squad will make a show of it, to the point of taking their name off the door – that they really screwed up. So, I'll let Frederica know that you can hire and fire, and she'll let the companies know."

"Um . . . Muriel, I don't know that I'm ready for that," Jeff said.

"Oh, nonsense. I never said you were. But you can learn. BOY can you learn. I know how many PhDs you've got. So, we'll set it up like this. Anything you're not comfortable with, come talk to me and we'll figure out how you can play it. But the last resort is, if they don't see things your way, fire them and have your squad escort them out," Muriel said. "And I'll back you one hundred percent. Oh, and you can wear grays when you do it. You don't work for Triple E. They work for you, and you work for me. Grays will cement that in the minds of the rest of the staff."

"Now," she went on, "for the time being, this company will have Envoys in the CEO and CFO positions. That will give you the opportunity to check out the next pair that are hired. It will also allow you the opportunity to see if anything underhanded was going on. By the way, I

expect that this will get out. If it doesn't, I may ask you to deny that there was any wrong-doing someplace where the staff can hear it, even if we have to manufacture the scene. The reason is that way the rest of the companies will know that you ARE, in fact, in charge. That might keep this from happening in the other companies. Secretaries talk. And I know for fact that some of them are friends with each other. In fact, there's one pair that work for competing companies. So this WILL spread. I want it to, but the best way to do that is to tell them that you DON'T want it spread around."

"I don't get it," Jeff said.

"Simple, really. They aren't military and don't have a military mind set. They're civilians, so if you tell them to keep it secret, then it will nag at them. So, they'll tell their best friend, but tell her to keep it secret. Nothing travels faster than secrets that aren't meant to travel at all," Muriel said. And Melanie laughed.

"Boy, you got that right, Muriel," Melanie said. "Politicians. You mark a document "TOP SECRET – NOFORN", and they'll have it in the paper – spun their way, of course – before the day is out. And if you were to mark it 'burn before reading and commit suicide after you read it' it would be out the door in fifteen minutes."

"Heck, Melanie. The crew you work with would be phoning from the President's office with the document still in their hands," Muriel said, laughing. "Now, let me get Frederica and Alice in here so we can sort out the paperwork. Besides, it gives my squad time to get them clear of the grounds, and the two Envoys in place."

Chapter 12

Legal Matters Matter (Monday morning)

"Hello, Sharon," Jeff said as he walked into the office. "Are they here, yet?"

"Sir!" the woman said, jumping to her feet. "Yes, sir. I'll get them for you."

"Oh, don't do that. By the way, how long have you been with this company?"

"Six years, sir," she said.

"It's just Jeff, Sharon. So . . . you weathered the changeover from publicly traded to private business, then," he said.

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Good. Well, we've had some unpleasant times in the past. Perhaps we should keep them there. After all, nobody needs to know that I had the Chief Executive Officer and Chief Financial Officer fired for cause. Nor that that action resulted in my being named President of the company. Right?" asked Jeff.

"Oh, right sir. I won't tell a soul. I promise."

"Very good. Now, I think, if he's not busy, I'll just drop in on our temporary CEO and see how things are going," he said, and went on into the inner office and closed the door.

"Now, we'll just wait for her to make that phone call," he said quietly, through a grin.

"Jeff, you're getting as bad as Muriel. How do you know that she'll make the call?" asked the CEO.

"Her best friend works for the competition. They're very close. And this is something too big for her to keep to herself," Jeff said. "And how do I know? Because Muriel told me. She taught me a bunch, Saturday. You both drink coffee? We're apt to be here for a bit." When they both nodded, Jeff produced three cups and a thermos of coffee, then produced sugar and cream. The cups had their names on them, followed by the Home logo, then the Triple E logo. "Those are yours," he said. "That ought to let people know who you work for."

"That it will. Oops. She's dialing, now," said the CFO.

Karen, I don't know how long I can talk, but I just had to tell you. You remember how I told you that Jeff had taken the CEO and CFO out Saturday morning? Then they came back with a squad in gray uniforms, fired? You know, the gray uniforms that the people from

Enclave wear? Well, he just came in this morning. He's president of the company, now, and HE'S wearing grays. Not those green things that he was wearing. He's in talking to the new CEO and CFO, now. Probably reading them the riot act so they don't mess up. Only his grays are different from theirs. Theirs are plain gray all over. His, the jacket sparkles. And there's a red stripe down his pant legs, and IT sparkles. And they're lighter than the other two. I think he's somebody important, and we never knew it. 'Cause only the important ones have those sparkley, lighter colored jackets. Look, I don't dare talk any longer. I'll see you later.

“Oh, my. Well, I suppose I should drop the other shoe, then,” said Jeff, “and show her my Home passport.” The two Envoys grinned back at him. He went to the door and opened it, then turned back and said, “Well, you look like you're settling in nicely. Just let me know if there's anything you need, or that I can do for you.” Then closed the door and turned to the secretary.

“Kinda showy, isn't it, Sharon. You should see the formals,” he said, and switched. “Now THAT'S just plain gaudy.” Then he switched back. By this time Sharon's eyes were huge. “Oh, didn't you know? I'm trained. Envoy training. See?” And he casually pulled his passport out of a 'no pocket' and handed it to her. “Go ahead, read it. There's no secret about it.”

Sharon opened the booklet, then remembered to close her mouth. She swallowed as she read what was inside, then promptly DIDN'T notice as her mouth dropped open again.

“That's signed by Ted, rather than Muriel. Oh, she could have, but Ted was working her into being an Ambassador slowly. Just like she worked us twelve that came with her in slowly. In fact, we had it easier. LONG before we could really understand what being an Ambassador was, she was already THE Leader of Home, and we'd done some really wild stuff,” he said, just rambling on to try to calm her down a bit. “You know, she never uses her titles unless somebody's really in trouble. The old CEO heard them, just before he was fired. Me? I'm just Jeff. And if I have to use my titles, well, somebody will be getting the axe. Muriel's right in that respect. Titles get in the way. If you have to resort to them, then any hope of saving the person on the other side is long since gone.”

He looked at her and smiled as he took back his passport. “I'm Jeff. Just Jeff. Not some ogre. Not some non-human from another planet. Just very human Jeff. And I have a job to do, just like you do. Oh, you drink coffee, don't you?” At her nod, he said, “Good. Here,” and produced a cup like the ones he gave the two Envoys, with her name on it. “If you like the coffee, ask the two Envoys. I mean the CEO and CFO. They can get more. It's made in Home.” He smiled again, and gave a small wave, and translated out.

He translated into Muriel's office grinning so hard you'd have thought his ears would have to move back. “Well, that's done,” he said.

“SH! She's on the phone again,” Melanie said.

OH, MY GOD! Karen. He's and AMBASSADOR! He's a friend of the Leader of Home!

He wasn't just promoted, either. He showed me his passport from Home! Just pulled it out of the air! It was dated FOUR YEARS AGO! And he can do the things Muriel can! He changed from that gray uniform into the formal version just BANG! Like that! And back again! Then he asked if I liked coffee, and gave me a cup with my name on it, right out of thin air, and with the Home and Triple E logos on it. He said if I like the coffee I should ask the TWO ENVOYS to get me more, 'cause it's made in Home! But Karen, the new CEO and CFO? THEY'RE ENVOYS. THAT'S why their uniforms aren't as fancy. I gotta go. Talk to you later.

By the time the conversation was over, both Melanie and Muriel were curled up in their chairs, trying to hold their stomachs, and nearly laughing themselves sick. Jeff was just chuckling softly to himself, and shaking his head. He caught Mata's eye, and she was grinning, and gave him a thumbs-up.

"I couldn't leave it alone, when she realized that I was 'somebody important'," Jeff said, when they finally were barely able to sit up and wipe their eyes. "So, I figured I might as well make it a whole production."

"You," Muriel said, pointing at him, "are a VERY BAD BOY! Oh, gad. All those exclamation points. You could HEAR them slap into place. You really put on a show. One she'll NEVER forget."

"You know, Muriel. All this time I wondered why you did it. Why you were so outrageous. Now I know," Jeff said, reflectively. "It's fun. And it really gets the point across."

"Jeff, that's going to be all over the plant in the next few minutes," Muriel said.

"Yea, and all over all the companies you head before the day is over," said Melanie. "Oh, my. I don't think I've laughed so hard since the times my dad would tickle me until I cried with laughter."

"So, now, do you know how to do it?" Muriel asked.

"I think so. Basically, it's just totally over blow them. But in such a way as to be a toss-off for me. Like it was nothing at all. I'm glad I practiced the coffee trick with the Envoys, though. I was nervous, and afraid I'd muff it. But doing it for them gave me the confidence to do it for Sharon," Jeff said.

"The trick is to only do things that you KNOW you can do. That you're familiar with, enough, that you won't goof," Muriel said.

"They tell officers in the Military the same thing. 'Don't try to do something you don't know how to do in front of the troops' is the way they put it. But it amounts to the same thing," Melanie added. "That meant, in my line of work, I had to be tougher and nastier than anyone I was apt to meet. Including big bruisers that could have snapped me in half. I'm surprised that I never thought to apply the idea to the Envoy techniques."

"Well, don't beat yourself up over it. I never knew any of that. I was always just being

me,” Muriel said. “And being me, I was insecure. So, before I did anything publicly, I always wanted to know that I COULD do it. Then I got trained, and pretty much applied that same principle when I acted. That, and the fact that things were building off each other, sometimes rather quickly, so that even if I didn't know exactly how to do something, I could still manage to achieve what I wanted to do. Well, in any case, are you going to make the rounds of the other companies?”

“Yep,” said Jeff. “I probably should. I'll hit another one this afternoon. Two a day should be enough. After all, I do have other work to do. And, I know just where to go this afternoon. Karen is just catty enough that she'll be on the phone as soon as I've left the office to let other secretaries know that I'm outrageous. And in charge.”

“What you're saying is that, before the day is out, ALL the companies will know that you've taken over as President, and that you're as bad as I am,” Muriel chuckled.

“Well, look where I get it from,” Jeff said. “You know, and please don't take this as a disparagement, but I always felt inferior to you. You were always so 'together'. Even when you were angry. I could never understand how you could do it. Then you got trained, and it was even worse, in a way. You always seemed to be so far ahead of the rest of us. And I envied you. NOW, I see that you were doing much the same as we were, it was simply how you were applying it that was different, and that was partly because of the position you found yourself in. You just let me in on the trick of that.”

“Oh, my. A girl just can't keep any secrets around you lot,” Muriel said.

“Oh, I don't know. We still haven't figured out who your boyfriend is,” Jeff replied. And Mata wiped off her screen. Again.

“Why, that's simple. I don't have one,” Muriel replied. “I've been too busy to look around. And besides, who would want me as a girlfriend. It's not like I'm pretty or anything.” Mata choked and moved her glass to the other side of her desk. Melanie just watched the by-play, grinning.

“True,” Jeff said. “You're more what I would call 'striking'.”

“As in 'always striking this or that person'?” asked Muriel.

“Well, now that you mention it, you've certainly made a 'hit' with some people,” Jeff said, casually getting up and leaving before she could reply.

“Ah, youth,” said Melanie. “You can tell the age of someone by how thick the double-entendres are around them.” And she waived at the air as if to brush them away, and they both laughed. “Well, I should get going. I can't leave him alone too long,” suggesting the President, “or he'll begin to think that he can think. You know,” she went on, “Saturday, I'd have thought that you were doing the same thing that GOOD commanders do to bring along promising young officers. Namely, building him up and showing him how he can be better. Then you two pulled this off, and I realized it was even worse. You were forcing him to

change how he thought of himself, his self-image and the image he projected to others, by placing him in a leadership position. He may come out from your shadow, now.”

“I hope so. The guy's a genius, and he throws off ideas like they're nothing. And he doesn't even realize it. I want him to realize it,” Muriel said.

“Any particular reason?”

“Yea. They can't be 'oh, Muriel's friends' all their lives. They've got to be themselves,” Muriel said. “Some of them have made that leap already, in their own way. Even our 'doubting Thomas'. At first, what he came up with in philosophy had him being attacked from all sides. Now, he's doing a circuit of colleges and universities all over the country. And he does it by NOT saying, 'this is the way it is.' But instead by suggesting it as another way of looking at things, and generating dialog. And he's written some papers – articles for magazines and such – much in the same way. He's got two honorary doctorates already that I know of, and spoken at a number of graduation ceremonies.”

“Wow. I didn't know that. I always see him just sitting quietly in his office,” Melanie said.

“I know,” Muriel said. “I didn't realize it until one day I was in chatting with him, and he got a call from a college. He put it on speaker phone, so I could hear. It was some professor lambasting him for his ideas. By the time the call was finished, the professor was inviting him to come talk to his classes. Tommy had turned it around in a short fifteen minutes, and I had a hard time keeping from laughing during it. It was that smoothly done.”

“What about Bobby?”

“Oh, him!” Muriel exclaimed. “Talk about a troubleshooter. When schools have troubles – and I mean anything from the loss of a well known student to shootings – he shows up in uniform and talks to the principal and whatever other officials are handy, and gets them to let him talk to the kids in groups. Then he switches to well worn jeans and T-shirt, and goes and talks to them, drawing them out as to what bothers them. Always letting them know that it's all right to feel that way, and exploring the reasons with them. By the time he's left the group, they're well on their way to healing from the situation.”

“Carla and Don you know about,” she went on. “Fran is on call with at least three hospitals that I know of. Operations DO go wrong, sometimes. And she shows up and fixes the problem, then disappears. The patients never know she was even there, and can't understand why they don't have any wounds from the operations they were going through. But the rest, well, they're still trying to find themselves. It's something I need to think about.”

“So, you think that Jeff will turn out the same way?”

“Nope. Jeff has just discovered the joys of absurdity. Instead of quiet and laid back, he'll be outrageous and friendly. More like Don. I think he'll stay in uniform, and play the part of the strange Ambassador that doesn't put on airs, while all the time visually screaming that

he IS an Ambassador, and not to be trifled with," Muriel said.

"Do you think they'll leave?"

"I don't know," Muriel said. "I do know that we'll always be close, always in contact with each other. So far, I'd say that they see this as a good point to start out from. Oh, they've all got places of their own, now. And I see some relationships blossoming, and not necessarily between the friends. Other than Don and Fran, that is. No, I think they'll think of Enclave as 'home base' and continue to work from here. It doesn't matter, either way. They're Ambassadors, so they'll still get their salary. And if they decide to move out, we could always set up another Enclave for them. At least enough to keep them comfortable."

"Well, I really do have to go," Melanie said. "Keep me informed as to how it goes with Jeff. That boy has me fascinated. It's like watching a bud suddenly opening up."

Chapter 13

The Assault on the Unaware (Monday afternoon)

A bell sounded, and a second later a figure appeared out of thin air, dressed in a gray uniform unlike any that most had seen outside of Enclave. "Hello, Karen," he said.

"Oh, my gosh! It's you!" she said.

"Of course it's me," Jeff said. "Same me that's visited you, numerous times, while waiting to talk to your boss. I'm no different now than I was, then."

"But . . . but . . . but you can do all these amazing things!" she said.

"Ah, yes. About that," he said, taking out his passport and handing it to her. She took it with some trepidation, and opened it and started reading. While she did so, he quietly created a cup of coffee, and added packets of sugar and cream on the side. He made sure that her name and the logos were facing her. "You DO like coffee, don't you?" he said quietly.

"Huh? Oh . . . yea," she said. Then it registered what he'd said, and she looked away from the booklet to see the cup on her desk. "Oh . . . my"

"Now, was there something else that I was supposed to show off?" he seemed to ask himself. "Oh, yes. The uniform. This is what I usually wear around Enclave, and when Muriel calls us friends out for something official. And once," he said, capturing her attention, "she had us wear this," and he switched to the formal outfit with the fly plaid billowing out behind in a localized breeze that Karen never felt. "The green jump suit was simply because I was representing Triple E, and it made me visible on the plant floor."

"Oh"

"However, certain . . . um . . . events, recently, have called for a bit of a change. Saturday, my authority was a bit limited. That's no longer so. Though I represented Triple E, I didn't work for them. I've always worked for Home. So, Muriel decided it was time that people realized it. What happened Saturday won't happen again," Jeff said. "So, basically, I'm going around letting people know that the competition between manufacturers is still on. But the guiding principle of the companies WILL adhere to Home standards." Jeff was well aware, and had been for the past few minutes, that he had an audience. The CEO was standing in his doorway with his mouth dropped open in shock.

"For the most part," he added, "things will run as they always have. And I may show up in a green jump suit from time to time. But that will simply be so that I'm recognized on the floor." Jeff pulled his passport out of his 'no pocket', thus removing it from Karen's hand, and handed it to the CEO. Then followed it with a cup of coffee. "Cream and sugar are there," he

said, smiling. "Let me know if you like the coffee. There's more where that came from, since it comes from Home."

"Uh . . . what do I call you now . . . sir," asked the CEO.

"Same thing you always have," Jeff said. "My name is Jeff. If I have to resort to titles, then somebody's done something wrong. Or, at least, not right. Muriel didn't want to ruffle too many feathers when we first started handing out the information on how to build cars our way. And I wasn't ready for the responsibility, really. So, she put me in as representing the holding company. But I am, and always have been, an Ambassador. She reminded me of that, Saturday, after the former CEO and CFO of one of your competitors were fired. So, she decided that maybe some closer affiliation to Home was needed. She suggested that I go around and re-introduce myself, so there wouldn't be any further mistakes. Oh, here," he said, pulling out an envelope, "this should probably go in the files to make it official."

"Yes, sir."

Jeff shook his head. "It's Jeff. Just Jeff," he said. "So, any questions?"

"J . . . J . . . Jeff?" Karen asked. "How do you do it?"

"What, you mean create coffee cups and change clothes and stuff? It's the Envoy training I have. It's just using the techniques in various ways." ::Muriel? How do you tell if someone is ready to connect to their soul?::

::Look at the soul. Does it look like its trying to pop out?::

::I . . . OH! OK, I may be bringing in another trainee. Do we have any girls that are good at training?::

::The secretary? OK, bring her. We'll find a way. We always do:: she sent with a chuckle.

"Karen, I think what you're asking is 'what is the training'. There's been a few ways that we've trained people. The easiest, so far, is the way that Muriel does it. I want you to think about something. You know that humans have a soul. And you know that Envoys ARE soul," he said, and she started to vibrate. "Where did the human soul come from?"

Suddenly, two things happened at once. Karen started to convulse, and Fran was beside her. "She's all right," Fran said. "Just let her be for a minute. Good GRIEF! Jeff. I felt that on clear across the country. Mister . . . I don't know your name but I take it you're her boss. My name is Fran and I'm a doctor, Envoy style. Your secretary is going to need a couple of days off to come to grips with this, and to finish the training." She didn't ask him. She told him.

"You're a . . . ?"

"I'm a doctor. Oh, and if it makes any difference," she handed him her passport.

He did no more than look at the word 'Diplomat' on the cover, and said, "Another one?"

"There's twelve of us. Oh, and Muriel, of course. About half of us have chosen career fields that we like and are good at. Mine is Envoy medicine," Fran said. "Jeff's is engineering and computer programming. And yes, we're all Ambassadors."

"But you're in white!"

"Of course. People expect that of a doctor. We don't HAVE to wear gray. Look at Jeff and what he wore, here, for so long," Fran said. "The gray uniform? It's just clothes. We can change them with a thought. Literally. Now, what else did she need to be here for besides answer phones?"

"I . . . uh . . . I'm not sure. I had some letters to get out," the CEO managed to stammer out.

"On it, Fran," Jeff said, and a young woman came into the office, wearing a sharp pants suit. In gray with a white blouse. "Jeff? Hi. As soon as she's coherent again, I'll ask her to show me some things about the office, then I can fill in for her. Besides, doing everyday sorts of things will help reground her."

"Who are you?" Asked the CEO.

"Oh, sorry. I'm Keri, and I'll fill in for Karen while she finishes her training. Then she'll be back, better than ever, and I can go back to Home and wait for the next emergency," she said, grinning.

"Back TO home?"

"Yes, sir. I'm an Envoy. Jeff put in a call for help. Specifically, for someone that can act as a secretary for a couple of days. I'm the someone. Oh, good. She's coming back." Things were quiet for a moment, then Karen looked up at Fran, then Jeff, then Keri.

"Woof! That was a trip and a half. Sorry about that." She looked at Keri for a couple of minutes while the two linked minds and passed information to each other. "OK, I think you've got it, and you can always ask me, if you have a question," she said. "Jeff, she passed me the information on how to make shields, but I haven't practiced it. Do we have time before we go to Enclave? And will it disturb my boss?"

"We can take the time," Jeff said, then turned to the CEO. "This is going to look strange for a couple of minutes."

"A couple of minutes? It's looked strange since I came in the room! Go on, do what you need to do," he said.

"OK, Karen, why don't you come out here and let Keri have your seat. Good. Now think about what she showed you, and try to build it. Good! Excellent. Now, add the sticky. That's it." Jeff pulled a coffee cup out of his 'no pocket' and threw it at the shield, and it stuck. "You're picking this up awfully fast."

"That's no way to test a shield," Fran said. Jeff retrieved the coffee cup, distracting Karen, and Fran pulled out a baseball bat and swung. The bat stopped a foot from the woman, and she never noticed it. "Now, THAT'S how you test a shield."

"Wait a minute," Jeff said. "That bat looks familiar."

"It should. It's Don's. I just borrowed it," Fran said.

"I didn't know you could do that!" said Jeff.

"Well, you couldn't. But I can get his bat any time I want it," Fran said, and stuck her tongue out.

"You two are acting like kids!" the CEO said.

"Probably because we ARE kids," Fran said. "Relax, sir. We don't bite. We're just like anybody else, really. We've just got some training that you don't have. Well, Karen," she said, "ready for a trip to Enclave? No, you don't have to bring anything. We'll supply it all." And she and Karen translated out.

"Where'd they go?"

"Oh, Enclave. She has a few things to learn, and some practice to do. Stuff like that. Then she'll be able to come back and be better than ever. And I wasn't expecting to stay this long. So, I'll be on my way. I'll see you next week with those upgrades you asked for," Jeff said, and translated out.

Muriel was waiting for him in his office. "Oh, oh. What did I do wrong this time."

"Nothing. Don't be so defensive. That was a quick pick-up on the secretary. You did good."

"It looked like she was about to connect without me," Jeff said.

"I saw. It was reflected in your mind. Nice catch," Muriel replied. "So, how'd the rest of it go?"

"I think I'm going to have some trouble with that CEO. Oh, nothing serious. But suddenly he thinks he's been demoted. And that I was a sleeper just waiting to take over."

"Keri should help settle him down. We'll keep Karen here for at least three days, I think, to give Keri the opportunity to work on him," Muriel said. "Anything else?"

"Yea. I've got a problem that I don't know how to solve," he said. "The look on the secretaries faces. I've seen that look before, which is why I prefer to work with men. For some reason, some women see me as . . . I don't know how to describe it. Like they want to own me, or something."

"OK, this actually isn't unexpected, Jeff," she said. "Girls go through it more than guys do. So, the question comes down to 'what are you going to do about it?'"

"I don't know."

"Ignore it. Honest. Ignore it. Don't pay it any attention at all. If they make suggestions or anything, just change the subject, ignore the suggestion, or walk away," Muriel said. "Believe it or not, it's not something serious. It's a natural reaction that people have to someone that's desirable."

"Should you be talking to me about this?" asked Jeff.

"No reason why not," Muriel said. "Jeffery Williams, I've been everything but your mother for years. I've bandaged your bangs, dried your tears when the harassment got too bad, kidded with you, listened to your problems and tried to help you through them. This is just another phase. And no, I wouldn't leave this to your father. He'd say to take advantage of the girls. That would end up hurting you both, though. And if you think about it, you'll understand why. This is a temporary condition, and WILL wear off. It's like an infatuation, really."

"GEEZ! You NEVER call me by my full name. This MUST be serious."

"It is, and it isn't," she said. "Yea, it's serious, initially. But in the long run, it's just a bump in the road of life. Something to get past without getting excited over it. So, just treat her as you always would, and ignore the looks and suggestions. It'll pass. I'll be honest with you. Part of what they're seeing is because of your sudden revelation of your status as an Ambassador, and your abilities. No, you did nothing wrong. But this is the reason I held off putting you in there as head of the company. To put it bluntly, you're a 'pretty boy'. You look young, and sweet, and innocent. And we both know the last is a lie."

"MURIEL!"

"Good, you're reacting. Now think. What COULD you have done, if you'd been younger and a girl made offers to you?"

"OK, I get your point," Jeff said. "And I see how it would have affected me negatively, and how it could have hurt the girl, seriously. I may need to talk to you again, though, sometimes."

"No problem. And I'll answer the next question before you even ask it. Yes, it DOES embarrass me. But, I also know that it's a lot less embarrassing to you for ME to talk to you

than it would be if it were, say, Ted or even Caleb. You KNOW me. You know I'll give it to you straight, even if it embarrasses me. Remember the episode with the girl's skirt?"

"Oh, GAD! You would remember that. That was a LONG time ago," he said, then stopped and thought. "And you're right. You told me what it was like from the girl's point of view, then turned it around by having me think of what it would be for ME to be exposed."

"Jeff, that was probably the most embarrassing talk I ever had to deliver, and at a time when I was still too young to understand all about it," Muriel said. "But what the bullies were doing was WRONG. And you understood it, and why, after our talk. I didn't talk down to you. At least, I hope I didn't. And I didn't say you were a bad boy or some such. I simply let you understand the other side of it, and make your own decisions. And, if I remember right, it resulted in you getting the most spectacular black eye from defending the girl. Well, that's past, and the bullies are still in jail. Well," she added, "juvenile hall, anyway."

"And you're doing the same, today. Just telling me like it is. OK, I get the point. But Muriel, if it ever DOES get too embarrassing for you to talk to me, PLEASE tell me," he said. "That's a kind of pain, too. And I don't like being the cause of pain. I'm sorry I put you through that when we were kids."

"Nope. I won't. Because NOT talking to you would be a worse pain for me. Or, at least I won't tell you until MUCH later. And, as it turned out, I was happy to have had that talk with you, and it makes it easier, now. Because you DO listen and understand. You've always been an Ambassador, since you came here. But now you're turning into a fine man," she said. "One I'm proud to know. And, I'll get out of here, now. This little talk was the whole reason I waited for you. You didn't do anything wrong, but I could feel the confusion and questions. So, I thought I'd better be available. Thanks for listening."

"Thanks for being here," he replied.

Chapter 14

The End of a Crush (Tuesday morning)

"Morning, Karen. How are you feeling, today?" asked Jeff, as she came into his office. He directed her to a chair in the casual area, and took his accustomed seat.

"A lot more stable than I did yesterday afternoon. Fran got me fixed up and leveled out. It's hard to believe she's only sixteen," she said.

"Good. How far did Fran take you. I know you've got the basics. I can see the stripes. But there's other things we can add that can help you in your work. As well as the battlefield first aid course, which is usually standard."

"Oh, Fran gave me that," she said. "I really hope I don't have to use it. But I can see where it would be useful. What else is there?"

"Well, right off hand, I don't know. But I know who would. Betty," he said and sent.

"Yes, boss," said the friendly Envoy. "I hear and obey, oh great leader."

"Hmm. Betty, I think it's time you took a long vacation. Your brain's overheating," Jeff said. By this time, Karen was laughing. "Seriously, this is Karen. Karen, when you come up for air, this is Betty. Betty is an Envoy and one of Muriel's squad leaders. She's also the one that came up with the basis for teaching us young hellions in minutes instead of years. Betty, Karen is a secretary at one of the car manufacturers we own. What can you suggest as courses for her?"

"Good question. Karen, can I link to you? It would be faster and easier for me if I could," Betty said.

"Sure. I guess. I'm still learning all this."

"OK, that gives me another parameter. Jeff, you may not have been keeping up with all the details, but we found a way to create a course out of a lot of the add-ons you crazy Ambassadors keep coming up with. So, that's the first thing. Then, well, there's courses in the human world that are for administrative assistants. I think that would be appropriate. Let's start there, and when they open up and you get a feel for them, we can see what else you need. This will just take a few minutes." Betty went silent, and you could almost see the stream of information go from one to the other. "There. Oh, this goes with it," she said, and handed Karen a certificate in a frame.

"PhD? Doctorate level? Me? I couldn't even get through college!" Karen said.

"Well, once they open up you will have the equivalent of a doctorate. I'd like to see how that meshes with your job before I go any further," Betty said.

"I just realized something. Passport, stripes, diploma, I'm a somebody," Karen said.

"You always were," Betty replied. "You just had to be shown that you were. And now, you're part of an elite group."

"Yea, all us goniffs in here," said Jeff.

"Plus all the other trained all over the world. Ambassadors, military, police, even a National Security Advisor," said a soft, friendly voice. "And Jeff, I'll get you for calling my friends goniffs. How are you doing, Karen. Is this jerk treating you right?"

"I'm sorry," said Karen. "I feel like I should know you."

"Well, so much for fame. I guess I'll have to go for fortune. I'm Muriel," she said, grinning.

"Oh!" Karen said, flying to her feet. "I didn't . . . I mean"

"Sit, Karen. Not to sound like I'm training a dog, or anything. I'm not anything special. Just Muriel. Just a sixteen year old girl. Sit, sit, sit," Muriel insisted, and sat beside her. "Look, I don't know how much was explained to you, or what you've had a chance to see or learn. So, I'll try to make this short and sweet. Everything, and I mean everything, that you've learned, that you've been given, food, medical, shelter, it's all free. You came here as a guest and a trainee. And, as a graduated trainee, that continues. So, if you ever need a place to crash, or to escape from it all, you're welcome here, and it won't cost you a thing. You'll understand the economics of it when you realize that YOU can make anything you want or need. Now, how was your room?"

"Oh, GAD! It's so much better than where I'm living that it's indecent," Karen said, and Muriel laughed.

"Yea, the Envoys in Guest House have tried real hard to outdo the best hotel in the world. I think they achieved it. Well, now that you can translate anywhere you know or can get an image of, you're welcome to stay there if you like," Muriel said.

"But . . . how"

"Just translate to work. How do you think Jeff gets around?"

"I never thought about it. Wait! I can do the things HE does?" asked Karen.

"Yes and no. The basics, yes. Some of the specialty stuff he does with cars and such, no. But there's a qualifier to that," Muriel said. "He's got the engineering knowledge and that spark of inspiration necessary to a genius, and is familiar with every inch of it. But . . . you

can make a coffee cup. And you can fill it with coffee, fixed the way you like it and as hot as you like it.”

“Oh, my. I really AM a somebody.”

“Oh, yes. You definitely are,” said Muriel. “Now, I suppose I should get back to work before the boss decides to replace me.”

“Wait a minute. YOU'RE the boss,” Karen said.

“Hmm. I knew there was something wrong with that statement,” Muriel said, grinning.

“I think you just tried to tell me not to take myself so seriously, didn't you?”

“Close enough,” Muriel replied. “There are enough serious things in the world. But that doesn't mean that you have to take them seriously.”

“But . . . how can you be that way?”

“Simple. We're kids. And what do kids do?”

And a collective chorus came from the twelve offices, “KIDS KID!” Karen busted up.

Muriel translated out, and Karen finally stopped laughing enough to look thoughtful. “I'm confused,” she finally said. “She says she's nothing special, despite all the things she is and does. But she says that I'm SOMEBODY just because I can make a coffee cup and coffee?”

Jeff laughed. “Oh, my. Yep. That's Muriel all over. Karen, EVERYBODY is somebody. Actually, I think that one was aimed at me. I never thought that what I did was anything special. I just looked at the world and said 'what if'. A lot. But . . . it was just being me. She has the same sort of outlook about herself. She doesn't think of herself as a title – or even a whole bunch of titles. She's just the person that took one thing after another and used whatever tools she had to deal with it. But, by the same token, she sees everybody as being unique, somebody special. Somebody to try to help, or have to deal with, feel joy with, or feel sorry for.”

“You're somebody, Karen,” he said. “You were somebody even before the training you just received. Now, you're somebody with a new set of skills and a bunch of new knowledge banging around in your head. And what you do with it will be interesting to see. And, that's what she was trying to tell me. I'm somebody unique in the way I deal with the world with the skills and knowledge that I have. Even though, from inside, it just seems like I'm just me, nothing special. She just told me that I actually AM special, in my own way, but not to let it go to my head, because everybody is.”

“That, my friend, is a very interesting outlook,” said a strange voice from the doorway.

“Aslam! Good morning. Come in. I'm afraid I'm no good at creating Arabic coffee, but what ever else you want is available, including the 'mundane' coffee we drink,” Jeff said. “So, you heard my little comment.”

“Yes. And I realized that your epiphany was as much about me as it was about this young lady, or you, or Muriel,” Aslam said. “Something special, but don't let it go to your head because everybody is. I will keep that in mind when I'm creating my projects. I definitely will. And you're right about Muriel. It definitely applies to her and her outlook. Young lady,” he said, turning to Karen, “you look like you're not sure of me. Feel in company, then, because lately I'm not sure about me. I am Aslam. I came here to find a cure for my wife. No, that isn't the way it should be said. I came here to find a cure for what my wife had. And got it. And got the training in the process. So did my wife. And in one day went from a Muslim man of religion”

“Clergy man, I think is what you're looking for,” Jeff said, when Aslam tapered off.

“Ah, yes, thank you. A Muslim clergy man. From that to, well, I don't know yet. So now, to try to find out who I am, I am creating histories of the religions of the world,” Aslam continued. “Why they were shaped the way they were, and how. And why people ever felt that they needed them. I make them for myself, but with the hope that others might find them interesting or enlightening. But to you, I am strange. Something different. Well, that I am. My clothes, the way I talk, the way I look – all strange to one of your culture. Am I special? I suppose so, from one point of view. But the point of view most familiar to me is that I simply go from one moment to the next, trying to deal with life with such tools as I have. And now I have a new set of tools to explore, new ways of doing things to play with and find out about. So, nothing special.” Karen grinned.

“Yes, I found you strange. I apologize for that, and I'll work on it,” Karen said. “I shouldn't react to just how a person dresses or talks.”

“It is your culture,” Aslam said. “I understand that. For too long, now, anyone different was the enemy. I will think about changing what I wear. I'm afraid there's nothing I can do about the way I talk.”

::Jeff! I want you, Aslam if he's there, and anybody else that's in your office in my office immediately!:: Muriel sent.

::Got it,:: he sent back, and translated them all without any notice.

“Aslam. Good. I was hoping you were there. We have a problem. Your wife's been grabbed. She's all right, and has been in contact with us, and I've got one of my squads flying over the top of the car in stealth mode,” Muriel said. “She let me know as soon as she was grabbed, and suggested that we wait to pick her up until we know where they were headed. Do you have any enemies in this country?”

“No. Not that I know of.”

“OK, I've alerted Melanie, and she's checking to see if it's anybody federal, and why,” Muriel added. “As soon as we know where, I'll have her translate back, or do it myself if necessary. We'll also grab the car and occupants, and put at least one squad on the location. I have a hunch who this is. It's a game they've played before with us – and lost – and I thought they'd learned their lesson the last time. Oh, by the way, she was INSIDE Enclave when she was snatched. I'm going to repeat. She is unharmed, calm, and in control of herself.”

::Muriel? We're on the road that has a sign that looks like a shield, with the number sixty in it:: Muriel broadened her reception to include everyone in her office.

::That's US 60. It runs into the Interstate 10,:: Muriel said.

::They've been talking about a plane, if that helps,:: Aslam's wife said. ::They said it would be ready when we got there. I wasn't supposed to be able to hear::

::You're doing fine, and a team is right over the top of you. Just be ready to either translate or scream mentally when I give the word. I've also got another team ready to take down the plane. Hang tight, you're doing fine::

::Excuse me, please, but what is 'hang tight'?::

::Sorry. Just hang on so we can see what plane they were intending to use::

::Ah, OK. I'm sorry about my not understanding,:: Aslam's wife said.

::No reason to be sorry. I was using idiomatic English, and shouldn't have been,:: Muriel replied. ::Team Two, if you need reinforcements for the building, then holler to Home. We've got a hundred available, in uniforms with the Security triangles::

::Aslam, be patient. They can't hurt me. They don't know it, yet, but they can't. I've played the submissive, defenseless woman, but I know I can leave at any time::

::I know, dear one. You've had much practice doing it with me,:: he sent back with a chuckle.

::We will talk about THAT when I get you home,:: she replied, but tempered it with a mental smile.

::Muriel,:: Melanie sent, ::I know who it is. It's ICE. I've got the head of HS and ICE in my office. Let me know when you want them. Oh, the head of ICE is getting his ears burned off for this caper::

::Bring them any time. Did HS know?:: asked Muriel.

::No. And she's the one giving the head of ICE the ear ache. We'll be right there::

"Mata . . . no, you're busy. Betty, we need chairs for three. Melanie's bringing in the head of Homeland Security and the head of ICE. And I'm running out of room in here," Muriel added, laughing. "Karen, your eyes look a little big. Should we let you go?"

"Not on you life! I've just never seen anything like this. I'm in," Karen said. "If I left and let my new boss down, now, I'd never forgive myself." Jeff just laughed.

"Well, then. We wait," Muriel said. "Aslam, when Melanie gets here, I'm going to ask you to show her your regular passport. This is just to touch base that you came into the country legally, and have the legal right to be in America. It has nothing to do with Home or this Enclave. You don't need a passport to come and go, here. And the men that did this performed an illegal act. They have no authority inside the grounds, and that includes the parking lot. All of Enclave is an Embassy, not just this office. It's part of the treaty. So, they violated the treaty and kidnapped your wife. Both are serious offenses, both in Home and in America."

"I understand. But it may not be necessary for me to show this Melanie my passport, as I showed it to her as soon as we arrived," Aslam said. "She is a very kind person."

"OK," Muriel said, "I'm going to ask that we rearrange the seating so that everybody faces the desk. We'll put the perpetrators in the front. This is going to look a bit like a court when they come in."

Chapter 15

Trial

(Tuesday morning, later)

::Alice, I've got a hot one,:: Muriel sent. ::A Citizen of Home abducted from inside Enclave, being transported to the airport by members of ICE. We're bringing them back for questioning and disposition.::

::I hope 'disposition' doesn't mean that you're going to kill them,:: her lawyer said, with some trepidation.

::Worse. I'm going to turn them over to Melanie. But I'm going to put the fear of me into them, first. I have a feeling that this will escalate to a hate crime. They're in the country legally. I believe the wife is being used to draw out the husband.::

::OK, off the top of my head, you've got stalking – they would have had to find her in Enclave – kidnapping and unlawful restraint. Hmm. How'd they know that the husband and wife would be in Enclave?::

::Probably our unfriendly ex-FBI agent turned sheriff,:: Muriel said. ::But I can't prove that.::

::OK, they were also impersonating a police officer, since their jurisdiction ended at the property line, and that's clearly marked. They couldn't have entered the parking lot without seeing the signs. Is the husband also a Citizen?::

::Yep. They both turned within minutes of each other,:: Muriel said. ::They'd come to Enclave in the hopes that we could cure her of a nasty bug.::

::OK, so they weren't in 'hot pursuit' of felons. The only possible thing they could try to say is that by entering Enclave they had left the country illegally. And that's covered under the Treaty. Free access both ways, no visa necessary,:: Alice said.

::Good. OK, I think I have enough to go on. Thanks, Alice. Gotta go. Melanie's coming in, now.::

“Hi, Melanie. I see you brought the head of Homeland Security with you. And this must be the famous 'Mister Jones', the head of Immigration and Customs. Take a seat, Mister Jones. We'll get to you, shortly. Nadeeda, are you all right?” she added, as Aslam's wife translated in.

“Yes, Muriel. Oh, I believe these belong to somebody here,” she said, taking her hands from behind her back and handing Muriel a set of handcuffs.

“Ah, yes. At least technically. We'll hold them for evidence,” Muriel said, transferring them to an evidence pouch and signing the chain of evidence when she'd sealed it. “Why don't you go sit with your husband and assure him you're all right. Oh, by the way, did your abductors identify themselves as police when they picked you up?”

“No. Not until we were in the car and outside of the Enclave grounds,” Aslam's wife said.

“So, straight kidnapping. Did Fran show you how to make a record?” asked Muriel.

“No, but one of the Envoys at Guest House did. Here you go. From the time I was approached by the men to the time that I left the car and translated here,” she said. “I was in contact with your squad through most of it, including some nasty tricks to make the two men in the back seat with me VERY uncomfortable.”

“Good for you!”

“Muriel, where do you want the three from the car?” asked Mata.

“Standing in front of me,” she replied, raising her desk and chair up on a dais, so that she would be seen over the heads of the men. She didn't have to wait.

“Hello, gentlemen. I believe you made a serious mistake,” Muriel said to the three men standing in front of her. “You managed to break the only law that Enclave has – you broke the peace. Now, that might not mean much to you, but it's really quite simple. This is Enclave, property of Home and under Home jurisdiction. And guess what? You hit the jackpot. You managed to get yourself noticed by the one person that can be your worst enemy. The Leader of Home. The one that created that rule for Enclave, and has the absolute authority to enforce it. Isn't that nice?”

“I don't know who you are, lady, but you're in deep trouble. You just kidnapped three police officers in the performance of their duties. Now, you're playing at being a judge, and we don't even have a lawyer to defend us,” one of them said.

“Uh, huh. Well, you missed the point, gentlemen. The kidnapping was what you did to one of my Citizens, and outside your jurisdiction. So, you weren't acting as police, because in Enclave you AREN'T police. And as for your not knowing who I am, my name is Muriel. I'm the Leader of Home, and I AM the judge of what happens here and on any property owned by Home.” A soft 'oh, shit' came from one of the other three. “And as for you having a lawyer, well, when I get through with you and turn you over to the American Federal authorities, you can have all the lawyers you want. Here, we don't play games with 'legal truths'. Here, we only deal with reality. And the reality is that you grabbed a woman who was in Enclave, transported her against her will off the property, then claimed that she was under arrest. That's kidnapping and unlawful restraint, at the very least. Then, pretending to be police officers – real ones identify themselves during an arrest, not after the fact once they've gotten clear of the area where they have no jurisdiction. So, tell me. Who put you up to this ill-fated action?”

"Lady, I don't have to tell you anything. Especially not without a lawyer."

"You really don't get it, do you. You're not in America, now. You are in Enclave, which is under HOME rule. When you go to another country, you abide by the rules of that country. You broke the rules, so now you face the one person that has the authority to determine your fate, and you stand there spouting nonsense," Muriel said. "Well, you will answer my questions to my satisfaction," she added, pushing the switch in his mind to 'truth'. "Now, who told you to pick up Nadeeda, the wife of Aslam?"

And he talked. He claimed that Aslam and Nadeeda were known terrorists, because they were 'rag heads' and 'illegal aliens', and that the Maricopa County sheriff had told them they were in Enclave, and had left America illegally. He also added that the Head of ICE had OK'd the action, himself.

"Melanie, do you mind having an additional suspect to take with you?" asked Muriel.

"Not at all. And I don't have to see their passports to know that Aslam and his wife entered the country legally. I've already seen them. I've also seen the paperwork that was sent requesting entry into the country to visit relatives, and checked to be sure that they really did have relatives in the country. State was very cooperative with me in that respect," Melanie said. "I even made sure they got to a good hotel, and got to see her relatives."

"Aslam?"

"It is as she has said, Muriel. When we got off the plane, she met us before we even got to customs, and made sure everything went smoothly. We were very appreciative of her assistance, and my wife got to see her mother again."

"Thank you, Aslam. Mata, would you have someone bring in that blithering fat man, please. It's time we ended his harassment. This time we have positive identification of his attempt to overstep his authority. In more ways than one, since Enclave isn't even in Maricopa county." In seconds, the Sheriff of Maricopa County was standing in front of her. She did the same trick with his mind, turning it to 'truth' before even addressing him.

"Good morning, Sheriff. I see you've been trying to interfere with the affairs of Enclave and Home again. We've heard testimony that you were the one that accused Aslam and his wife of being illegal aliens, known terrorists, and attempting to escape America illegally. Also, that you placed them in Enclave and 'suggested' that ICE pick them up. Is there anything you'd like to add to that?"

And it began. A long, rambling tirade on how Enclave was an illegal operation, and people from any of the so called Arab countries were all terrorists and should be shot on sight. How Muriel was just a little girl play-acting at being the head of some nation that nobody had ever seen or been to, and that the whole Enclave should be shut down and everybody there arrested and deported. To where, he didn't bother to say.

"Very good. So, you did tell these representatives of ICE to pick them up?" asked Muriel.

"Of course I did! They don't belong in this country," the Sheriff said.

"Thank you. And did you have any evidence of their wrong-doing to base that on?"

"What? They're from Iran. It's obvious that they're here to cause a terrorist incident," he replied.

"I think that takes care of the details. Conspiracy to commit an illegal abduction. Violation of the sovereignty of an Embassy. That should be enough to keep you out of trouble for a long time. Melanie, is there anything else you'd like to know," Muriel said, before turning the minds of the two men back to normal.

"Nope. I think that about covers it. Oh, I'd like a copy of Nadeeda's record, if I may. And Nadeeda, you are to be commended on your composure through the whole thing," Melanie said. And Aslam just looked at his wife, as if he'd never seen her before. "If you're done, here, I'll take this pond scum off your hands."

"Thanks, Melanie. Yea, I'm done. Though when you get through with this petty, empire-building sheriff, and if he's still alive, let me know and I'll be happy to show him Home actually exists. It might be good for a laugh," Muriel said.

"Naughty, naughty. One isn't supposed to get such joy out of another's misfortune. However, let me know and I'll go with you. I'd love to see the worm squirm, myself," Melanie laughed. And she gathered up the assembled mass of people and translated out. Muriel dropped her desk back down to the floor, and people re-arranged the chairs in the casual area.

As Muriel sat down in her recliner, she said, "Nadeeda, Melanie said something that disturbed me a bit. She commended you on your keeping your composure. Just how DID you know to do that, and let this play out?"

Nadeeda sighed, "OK, she taught me."

"Uh, huh. You've either said too little or too much. Should I ask you in private? Away from Aslam?" asked Muriel.

"No. He knows most of this. Just not this part. I knew Melanie before she was sent to that last assignment that decided her to leave the Marines. She was teaching a bunch of us what to do if captured by the enemy. First rule is, escape when you get the opportunity. Second is, DON'T resist, wait for your opportunity and take it. And we played out various scenarios," she said.

"You were a Marine, in law enforcement?" asked Muriel.

"I'm an American citizen. I was born in this country. My parents live in Phoenix, and no, they're not Muslim," she said. "After I left the service, I went to college, and met Aslam there. Well, when he asked me to marry him, I put a whole lot of qualifiers on it. I'd play the dutiful wife in public, but it was to be understood that we were actually equal. Thing like that. He agreed, so I changed my name, legally, to remind him of that promise. Nadeeda means equal to, implying equality to a person. Anyway, we went back to Iran, and he tried to get people to understand that using force to get people to become Muslim was against the teachings of Mohamed. And that using violence to take over or intimidate countries and people that had never done anything against Muslims was anathema. But, we saw the tide turn against us. So I contacted the State Department for visas. Melanie found out about it, and we worked out the details."

"So, we got here, and I fell sick. Melanie suggested that I come here. I didn't know she was trained, at that point. It was only after I got trained that I found out. So, anyway, once these guys approached me and ordered me to come with them, I hollered for help, and the rest you know. I knew they couldn't hurt me, so it was easy to play along. And Fran was the one that told me about the handcuff trick. I figured, worst case scenario, that I'd show up here with them still on, and somebody here would remove them. But it was actually easy to do," she concluded.

"Oh, my. Well, you play the dutiful wife very well," Muriel said, snickering.

"Yea, well, it got Aslam out of Iran before this whole mess blew up. And now, with the mental link, I can still play the dutiful wife, and keep him from putting his foot ALL the way in his mouth," she grinned back. Aslam just looked at her. The look wasn't bad. Just more of wonder at this woman he'd married.

"You were a Marine? In law enforcement?" he finally asked.

"Yea. I was even thinking of going back in as an officer. That is, until that whole mess with Melanie blew up. I don't think I'd have put up with it as long as she did," Nadeeda replied.

Bob Garcia walked in and asked, "Muriel, what was that all about?"

"Kidnapping and the abuse of power by a local sheriff that we've both had run-ins with, and, of all things, ICE," she replied. "I think Melanie's about to start screening for sociopaths of prospective leaders of law enforcement agencies in the federal government. Maybe even for those in the ranks, too."

"About time," he replied, and wandered back out.

Nadeeda looked questioningly at Muriel, and Muriel said, "He's our chief of police. He doesn't mind my trumping him, but he likes to be kept in the loop. He's a good man, and likes that there's only one law, here. He also knows that I'll back him up, fully, in any situation. This popped up too fast for us to really involve him. You were already off-site when you hollered, and he's VERY adamant that he only works INSIDE Enclave. No jurisdiction

problems that way.”

“Geez! An honest cop?”

“Yep. And something that you won't see too often. He's a returnee. Constructed body. The Envoys of Home, along with Mark, wanted to see if it would work, and he volunteered. He was a cop when he was alive, and he's far enough away in time that we could probably find a way to reintroduce him to society. But he doesn't want to be bothered. He **LIKES** it here,” Muriel said.

“Hmm,” Nadeeda said. Then looked at Aslam and said, “What! You knew I was in law enforcement, before.”

“Yes, but I didn't know that you'd consider getting back into it,” he replied.

“I might, under a **GOOD** cop, and not some autocratic bully. I'd have to learn some new techniques, though. I wonder if Melanie would teach me.”

“Or Tex, in the state police, or Henry or Adam in the FBI,” Muriel said. “Or . . . well, there's a lot of people we've trained, now, in both military and law enforcement. But you're right. Start with Melanie. She has a reputation.”

“I know. One riot, Melanie, no contest. Melanie wins,” Nadeeda chuckled. “I still can't believe she broke a guy's arm by accident. She **NEVER** does anything by accident. She taught hand to hand to our class, and even guys twice her size and black belt couldn't touch her, and couldn't get away from her. She had to stop when the clinic complained of all the bruises the guys were getting.”

“Well, I'm for lunch. Anyone want to go to Arthur's?”

Chapter 16

What Draws Flies? (Tuesday lunch)

"What do I call you?" Karen asked Muriel, as they waited for their orders to be brought out.

"Muriel."

"But . . . you're an Ambassador and Leader of Home. I can't just call you by your name," Karen said.

"Sure you can. Try it. Mur-i-el," Muriel said, drawing out her name and grinning. "You're still suffering under the delusion that I'm something more special than you are."

"Muriel," said Jeff. "There ain't no such thing as 'more special'."

"Sure there is, and she thinks I'm it. Now hush, child, and let me work my magic on this poor defenseless girl you brought to us," she said.

"I didn't bring her, Fran did."

"Picky, picky, picky. You were the one that triggered the connection, therefore you're are the one responsible for her. Fran just took over after the fact, because she's a girl and you aren't. Though, I understand that could be arranged. You'd look pretty as a girl," Muriel said. Karen choked.

"All right! Where is she," said a gruff male voice. The manager of the restaurant quickly had an additional table and chairs added to the collection now accommodating the assembled masses.

"Probably not here. What are you doing here, Adam? Run out of real work to do?" asked Muriel.

"Melanie said you had a sleeper, here. Someone with REAL cop training, and she should know because she trained her. But she needs an upgrade to account for the Envoy techniques," he replied.

"And you brought a friend. How thoughtful of you. Two men to pick on one poor, defenseless girl."

"Three. Tex will be along as soon as he's put a speeder to bed. The guy actually thought he could outrun Tex. By the way, that flying trick you taught him works on his car, too. He lifted off the ground and was doing two hundred miles an hour to catch the dude. Come to

find out, the perp had just hit a convenience store,” Bob said. “And he got the information from the same source. Melanie. And I get first dibs, if she wants to get back into it.”

“You guys!” Muriel said. “You haven’t even asked the woman what SHE wants to do. And her husband might have something to say about it, too, you know.”

“Not me,” said Aslam. “She made it plain to me, way back when, that she would do what she felt was appropriate. I don’t have a say in the matter. I might have opinions, but she makes her own decisions.”

“And does she listen to your opinions?” asked Henry.

“Well, actually, sometimes she does. Sometimes it ends up in a discussion,” Aslam replied.

“Then hang on tight to her,” Henry said. “A woman that listens and thinks is valuable. Most of them I’ve met simply want to follow mommy’s way of doing things, and won’t change.”

“You’re not supposed to change women. You’re supposed to accept them as they are,” said Muriel.

“Why not? They try to change men,” said Adam.

“No, we improve them,” Muriel said, primly.

“Uh, huh. It’s still a change, no matter what you call it. You’re interfering with men’s lives,” he said.

Karen just looked from one to another, like she’d been dropped in a whole new world and didn’t know what to expect. Finally, she said, “Um . . . are you guys for real, or is this just an act you put on to impress the locals?” Henry and Adam just fished out their ID cases and flipped them open.

“We do come on a bit strong, don’t we. Comes from having to deal with people like Muriel. So, what do you do?” asked Adam.

“I’m a secretary. For a car manufacturer.”

“Any good?”

“Well, I used to think so. Then I got here, got trained, and they dumped a whole load on me that makes me think I was just playing at it. I’ll be better, now,” Karen said.

“No regrets?”

“Yea, one. I wish I’d had it sooner. But no. Not really regrets. I just don’t understand how I all of a sudden found myself in such elevated company,” she replied.

"Comes from all that clean living," Jeff said, and she blushed. "Not THAT kind of clean living. Well, maybe that, too. You had no secrets to hide, no intentions to take over the world sort of thing."

"Well, if you ever need a new job, let me know," Adam said. "We're always looking for good secretaries. Seems like we just get one, and she either gets married and quits, or just quits and goes to work for someone else."

"Wait a minute! Don't you go stealing my people right from under my nose!" Jeff said.

"Oh? She works for you?"

"One of my companies," Jeff said. "And she's just getting used to the fact that I'm Envoy trained and an Ambassador."

"So, she just fell into your lap, so to speak," Adam said.

"Well, she came with the company," Jeff replied, dodging that particular innuendo. "And she was ready to connect. I thought it would be better if we did it, and made the connection complete."

"True. Now, young lady," Adam said, turning to Nadeeda, as their meals arrived, "let me be nice and ASK you. Would you like the information on how the FBI works, and the additional training that takes into account the Envoy techniques?"

"Possibly," Nadeeda replied. "Though I think I'd probably work with – or for – the chief of police, here. First, it's closer to home for me. Second, I don't know that I'd want a steady diet of what you FBI pukes go through. And third, I'm still waiting to see what the competition has to offer." Adam busted up laughing.

"Well said! That definitely put me in my place. Well, the offer of the information still stands. There might be times when it would be beneficial for us to have you help us, even if you don't become an FBI puke," he said, grinning. "And the Envoy techniques can blend with what Bob, Tex or Melanie will show you. Might even be good to have them all in one place. A lot of it is personal preference and things we've worked out to manage situations."

"Is this a private party? Or can anyone join?" Melanie asked, and immediately belied the asking by sitting down.

"Hey! That's Tex's chair," said Bob.

"He's a big boy. He can get another," Melanie said.

"I thought you were busy working," Muriel said.

"What? Me work? I don't work, I just play at it," Melanie said. "Nadeeda, don't let

these wolves fool you into working for them. Being FBI is a nasty business.”

“Oh? And what are you offering?” Nadeeda asked.

“Oh, I'll give you Secret Service procedures, and what I've worked out with the Envoy techniques. But I wouldn't suggest that you join up,” Melanie said. “It can get pretty nasty for a woman in civilian law enforcement. Stick to Bob. At least he's honest and decent.”

“Now, THERE'S the kiss of death if I ever heard it,” Bob said. “Seriously, most of it isn't needed here. We don't get the violent crime, or even thefts. The most we get are two people in a disagreement, or sometimes drunks. Pretty tame stuff for a leatherneck.”

“Wa-al, I'll be. Never thought I'd see so many flies in one place in my life,” Tex drawled. “And you all know what draws flies and smells bad. Don't you be taken in by those impostors. They don't know what real law enforcement is like, 'cause they just play at it.”

“And don't you be taken in by Tex's drawl,” Muriel said. “He's from Indiana.”

“Illinois.”

“There's a difference?” asked Muriel.

“Sure is. They've got Gary. WE'VE got Chicago,” he said. “And that's the reason I got INTO law enforcement. I figured if I was gonna get shot at, I might as well have the right to shoot back.” Karen giggled.

“Secretary? Looking for work?” asked Tex.

“Now, just a doggone minute! She works for ME. Don't I have any say in the matter?” asked Jeff.

“Nope,” came the chorus of replies from the massed law enforcement. And Karen giggled again.

“Well, I hate to disappoint such distinguished – or is it extinguished – company,” Nadeeda said, “BUT . . . the thing I used to like about law enforcement was looking impressive and telling people how to find the restrooms. And that's basically what Bob is offering. And before I'd even consider that, I'd talk to my husband. So, you can all stop planning my life for me.” She looked down at her plate for a minute, then said, “However, if you meant it about sharing your procedures and Envoy techniques, I wouldn't mind having them. Who knows, they might come in useful, sometime.” It took a while to sort out, but all of them managed to dump their procedures and Envoy technique extras to her before lunch was finished.

“OK,” Nadeeda said, “I've got the dumps”

“There's a cure for that, you know,” Jeff said.

Nadeeda stuck her tongue out at him. “AS I was saying, I've got them, and taken a look at them, and I can see the differences in your procedures. About what I would expect, considering your individual focuses. The Envoy techniques, though, are amazing! How'd you come up with them?”

“Mostly, by getting shot at, and learning how to duck,” Tex said, kidding. “The real work is all done with shields. There are some amazing things that you can do with them. And each of us has had different experiences, so we've had to come up with solutions to meet them. Sometimes, on the spur of the moment while things are happening around us.”

“I'll second that,” Melanie said. “You wouldn't believe some of the situations I've been in.”

“Who came up with the idea of using shields like airbags, to lift semis?”

“Oh, that would be us,” Melanie said. “My guys needed to lift a truck off a car to get at some critically injured people.”

“And flying trucks and cars?”

“Now, that would be us,” Jeff said. “Same accident. Tied up the expressway. So, after we got the injured out of the way, we moved the vehicles to the median. You should see the video of it that the news media did.”

“Jeff,” said Karen, “How old were you when you did that?”

“Twelve. And I didn't do it alone. It took all of us in a coordinated effort to make it work. Ten people, ten cars, and two people for the truck, if I remember right,” he said. “That was almost as much fun as grounding planes sent to exterminate all of us. They never stood a chance. Muriel, did we ever return the planes?”

“Nope. They were destroyed by Ted. It put that country on notice, I can tell you,” she said. “Nadeeda, I'm almost tempted to give you the dump we give working Ambassadors. That's a real eye-opener. We've gotten into some really strange situations and only the fact that no government can touch us has kept us out of jail. Trouble is, if I gave you that information, I'd have to make you an Ambassador. And it's really not a nice job. Law enforcement is cleaner, even at it's worst.”

“Then why would you want to give it to me?” Nadeeda asked.

“Because, you're a thinker. And you're obviously connected hard. To be able to examine the downloads you just got, you had to have assimilated them,” Muriel said. “But . . . you're too gentle. And that could lead to mistakes that could hurt somebody. Oh, not intentionally, of course. But even the youngest of my Ambassadors is aggressive, in a positive way. And their reaction times are unreal. Also, I don't have a country to put you in, and trying would upset your husband. And this place is a target for everyone.”

"You could show me some of what Ambassadors have had to do, and let me make my own decisions," she replied.

"Yea, I could. At least let you see what we've done. But the final decision HAS to be mine. I'm the one responsible, and it's on my conscience when things go wrong. At least, at first," Muriel said.

"Who's the youngest?"

"Anna, in Russia," Muriel said. "She's just a bit younger than I was when I started. And it really scared me to put her in that position. The up side is that Russia, for all it's faults, is fairly stable right now. So, mostly what she'll be doing is reacting to civilian emergencies and making suggestions to the President. And I've been following her. She's doing good. Mobilized Envoys to handle a fire and put it out that the fire departments couldn't handle. The building was a loss, but no other structures were damaged, and no loss of life. And she was first in, making sure that things were safe before letting even the fire inspectors in to examine the building."

"I'm next, along with my yayhoos like Jeff, here," she added. "But they aren't in the decision position that I am. Still, they've done themselves proud, more than once. And the flying cars is just one example. Before that, same accident, they were pulling people out of cars and fixing them up so that they could walk away from that accident. To me, THAT was the greater part of it. It was their care of the casualties that impressed me."

"I never knew that," Jeff said. "I always thought that it was the coordination we pulled on that and the missile attack that impressed you."

"Oh, it all impressed me. It's just that care of people beats moving cars and trucks," Muriel said. "Care of people always comes first with me. But I think you know that."

"Yea, I guess I do. Even when that 'care of people' is simply to not put someone in a position they can't handle, and when they can, moving them into it," he said, reflecting on what she'd done with him in turning the companies over to him. "Well, we should get out of here, and let these people earn some money. There's a line building up, outside."

"Um . . . , " Karen said.

"No charge," Muriel said, almost reading her mind. "First, your a guest. Guests don't pay. Ever. Second, your trained in Envoy techniques, and the Envoys know it. So, again, no charge. Third, you're an employee of one of our companies. Employees don't pay, either. And now, you're going to ask why the Envoys put up with it. Steve. Yo! Steve. This young lady wants to know why you don't charge those with Envoy training."

"Why, that's simple," he replied. "The food doesn't cost us anything. We make it, just like you can make a cup of coffee. And we enjoy being of service. It's almost like a game for us, except that it's serious. It's like, kinda a competition we have with ourselves to do the best

that we can to make others happy. And third, and most important, every person with Envoy training increases our knowledge of humans and what it means to be human. And that, alone, would be payment enough for us.”

“Now, the visitors are a different matter,” he went on. “They expect to pay for things, so we charge them. But not as much as what they'd pay on the other side of the Enclave walls. Just enough that they feel that they've paid for something. And the money goes to pay for things that Enclave CAN do, like help the poor and needy and homeless. Like act as emergency funds for those that get into financial trouble. Things that make us the 'good guys' so that we can train more people and help more people. Make sense?”

“Yea, I guess it does. What you're saying is that Enclave is 'home' to those that have the training. A place of safety they can go when they need to, or even just a place to relax. And you don't pay at home, because you're paying in other ways,” Karen said.

“That's it, exactly,” Muriel said. “Thanks, Steve.”

“Yea. Thank you, Steve. That helped,” Karen added.

Chapter 17

Dilemma

(Tuesday afternoon)

"Muriel, you have a call. Can you speak Farsi?" asked Mata.

"I don't know. I know Betty gave it to me, but I've had no one to test it against."

"Well, you do, now. I'll transfer him."

"Thanks Mata," she said, then when her phone rang, "Ambassador Muriel speaking."

"You are a woman?" asked the speaker.

"Yes, of course. What can I do for you?" she replied.

"I am Farrokh Kadivar, President of Iran. I have need of your help. People are dying, here. Too many people injured. Hospitals cannot help them."

"I'm sorry to hear that, sir. But your people have rejected help from Home and the Envoys," Muriel said. "It was made very plain to us that your people wanted nothing to do with ones that do not profess Mohamed as the Prophet of God. What they objected to the most was the use of Envoy techniques."

"We need help, now! You must come. Bring your doctors."

"Hold on, please." Muriel turned to Mata. ::This doesn't pass my sniff test, but we have to respond to a legitimate call for help from any nation.::

::I can have two hundred Envoys trained in medicine in about five minutes. And you're taking all four squads and me,:: Mata replied.

::OK, get them trained. I'll try to stall him for five minutes. Class 'A' uniforms and Security triangles. Mata, would the Envoys be willing to wear the same type of uniform that Fran's squad use, but with the Islamic symbol for doctor on the collar?::

::I don't see why not. I'll suggest it to them.::

::Thanks, Mata.::

"I'm sorry for the delay. I had to see if we had trained personnel that we could bring over. We do. Now, where are you right now?" asked Muriel.

"Government building. I'm sorry, we do not allow pictures of government buildings due

to the danger of unstable elements trying to do us harm.”

“Very well, is there a conference room nearby?” she asked.

“I . . . yes. There is.”

“Good. Would you go there, please? Take your phone with you so I'll know when you get there,” she said. “I will meet you, once you are there.”

“All right, I'm going. But surely you can't fit two hundred people in the conference room,” he said, while walking.

“No, of course not. But I need space to be able to translate in,” she said in return.

“Very well, I am here.”

“And so am I,” Muriel replied, having homed in on his phone, and 'seen' the room from his location. The man seemed startled, but recovered quickly. His clothing looked the worse for wear, but Muriel discounted that as being a factor of the unpleasantness that occurred in the country.

“Ah, thank you for coming,” he said, and advanced and hugged her. “And now, you will do as I say. You cannot leave. You will be my wife, and will be submissive to me.”

“Not hardly,” Muriel said, and pushed him off with the shield. “We are here to see to your injured and sick. NOT to play your little games.”

“You do not understand. You cannot leave. My scientists have guaranteed it. You have no choice but to submit to me in all ways, and thus I show that Iran has conquered the infidel people that say they are from some fictitious country,” he said.

::Oh, my. Mata?::

::No problem. Envoys have been bopping in and out, all over the country, finding the worst cases. We can still translate. And I've got engineers examining what ever it is that his scientists think they've done::

“Well, Mister Kadivar, I think you'll find that you'll have a great deal more difficulty in 'subduing' me than you had in getting me here under false pretenses. You may not realize it, but such a stupid threat from you is grounds for us to withdraw all help. Is that what you want? Do you want your people to die?”

“It does not matter. They will live or die by the will of Allah, not by anything that you can do.”

“Really. Then I think you misunderstand the nature of Envoys and the training such as I have had. Mister Kadivar, I will put this to you plainly. Did you really want our help with your

injured and sick, or was this just a ploy for you to get me here and try to subdue me?" Muriel asked.

::Mata? What's the status of the injured?:

::The worst cases, the critical ones, are out of the critical stage,:: she replied.

::Then we're leaving, and the doctors are going too. This country is now going to be walled off, totally.::

"Oh, who cares about those little people. It is YOU I wanted here, and their injuries served Allah's will by providing me the means to get you here."

"Uh, huh. That's what I thought. Sorry, but you'll have to see to your people yourself. Home does not support the petty efforts of a childish would-be emperor in bolstering his claim to the throne. And, we'll make sure the 'little people' understand how much you think about them." She, Mata, her squads and the doctors translated out. And, at the border of the country, a shield was erected that domed over the entire country. Nothing, now, could get in or out.

From five hundred feet above the shield, Mata sent the record of the 'President's' talk with Muriel to the television stations, and locked it into an endless loop. Then they added a shield to the outside that kept all communication from being able to pass. No phone, no satellite, not even smoke signals or mirrors would get in or out. Land lines were cut, and the country was on its own. The Envoy doctors returned to Home, and Muriel translated her squads back to Enclave.

"I'll have the record to the media, shortly. Expect that there may be some outrage against us because we didn't cure everybody," Mata said.

"I'll answer it. And I'll try to re-direct it to the fact that his request was just a sham, and he didn't care about the people," Muriel replied. "I expect the greater outrage will be because I ordered the country walled off. It can't support itself. That means that even more people will die 'by the will of Allah'."

"You're intending to keep the barrier up, then?"

"Unless someone can give me a good reason for letting that poison back into the world, yes. Eventually, I expect that there will be NO population in the country. Then it can be scoured and cleaned up, and left as an unlivable scar on the world – a testament to duplicity and its rewards," Muriel said.

"That's serious," Ted said, coming in.

"As a heart attack," Muriel replied. "That petty little jerk wanted ME to bolster his position by marrying him. He's lucky I didn't just kick him in his 'wedding tackle' hard enough to launch him over the building."

"Hmm. Good point. Maybe you should have," Ted said. "But still . . ."

"But still, nothing," Muriel said, cutting him off. "Ted, that country has been the source of more problems than just about any other except America. And at least America was TRYING to do the right thing. Even with all the stupidity of wars for profit. But that country – all they wanted was to watch the world burn. And the people are as guilty as the leadership. They went along with it. They could have left, they could have fought against it – other countries did – or they could have voted them out of office. They did none of those things. So, yes, I took unilateral action and isolated them. Forever? Who knows. I might relent in a dozen years. But don't count on it."

"What if the President asked you to relent?"

"HE can go marry that goniff," Muriel replied. "And good luck with who does what to whom."

"Ouch. OK, Mata, direct any calls from the President to me, please. I don't think he's ready to hear what Muriel REALLY thinks about his love life," Ted said, smiling.

"OK, OK, I'm angry. Mostly about being duped like that. The scum saying I was going to marry him was just the capper to it," Muriel said.

"Well, if it's any consolation, from what we can tell, his reign just ended. Permanently. It would appear that his head is now resting on a spike outside the building," Mata said. "I'd say that walling off the country was a good idea."

"Hmm. OK, so they're still in flux. I take it that you've got someone monitoring them?" Ted asked.

"Yep. This is too volatile to leave alone. We did it originally, to be sure that it didn't escape the country," Mata said. "But now, it's our only way to find out what's going on. Not that I blame Muriel. The critical patients are no longer critical, and the rest can be handled by their own doctors. The fact that there's still no government simply reinforces her decision. Ted, her snap decisions usually turn out to not be snap decisions. Quick, yes. But she's in tune with her balance. I can feel it. I think she made the right decision."

"Well, convincing other people of that may be difficult," Ted said.

"Maybe. But the other Ambassadors are on her side. And you don't want to know what bloodthirsty Anna had to say about it," Mata said, grinning. "But it had to do with pruning the stock."

"OUCH! Bloodthirsty is right," Ted said.

"Oh, oh. Interesting development. Somebody got to the nukes. This isn't going to end well. That shield won't let anything through. And a missile counts as 'anything'. And yep. It

went off when it hit the shield. Fortunately not near any large population. But the ground under it will be radioactive for a long time," Mata said.

"Can it get out?" asked Ted.

"Ted, NOTHING but normal mix of air can get through it," Mata said. "They're going to have to deal with it themselves."

"OK, Muriel, I haven't told you what to do in years," Ted said. "But right now, I'm telling you that you are not to talk to the media. I will. No offense, but I don't want any of your anger coming across to the media. They'll take it the wrong way."

Muriel sighed, then said, "You're right. OK, I'll stay holed up in here, or in my apartment."

"What? No argument?"

"Nope. You're right, Ted. I'm not in any shape to handle the media right now. I'll let you do it. I know it's something that you can do well, perhaps better than I can," Muriel said. "I've been relying on the fact that I'm young and appear to be innocent for too long. They're not going to buy that in this case. And if I'm angry, then I'm apt to say something I shouldn't."

She looked up at him and gave a wane smile. "You know how to answer their questions without answering their questions, and you have all the details. I think I'm going to go lay down for a while. Like until the media leaves," she said. "You can always say it's the strain of the day."

"Are you all right?"

"Yea, sure. I just need to let it wash through me. My balance isn't complaining. Mata was right about that. I was suspicious to begin with, but hoped it was an opening. I think I'm maddest BECAUSE of that. The decision, though, was based on the fact that he didn't care what happened to the people, coupled with the fact that we'd taken care of the critical cases. Somehow, I knew that the situation was still unstable. I need to sort that out. Because that's what decided me to wall them off. And, if they're tossing nukes around, then I'm even more glad I did," Muriel said.

"OK, but don't lay down. DO something. Let your mind sort itself out in the background. Watch a movie, or create a sculpture or something," Ted said.

"OK, yea. I see your point. Keep me from spiraling on the same subject. Movies it is, then. There's a couple of new ones that I haven't seen," she said, and translated to her apartment.

Ted looked questioningly at Mata. "She's all right. This isn't like the times when she was twelve. The decisions were good, her balance says so," Mata said.

“Even if it kills more people?”

“Maybe especially because of that. Ted, I don't have all the answers, yet. All I know is that her balance has never been wrong since she found it. Even the times she doubted herself, the balance won. She's uncanny like that. If you wrote this as a book nobody would believe it. NOBODY is right all the time. But she keeps coming out, if not right then not wrong. At least justified in her decisions.” Mata shook her head. “We're still trying to figure out how and why she can do it.”

“Well, I'll go figure out what I can tell the media without lying and without really answering their questions,” Ted said.

Chapter 18

Distraction

(Wednesday morning)

It was Wednesday morning before Muriel came back down to her office, looking chipper and well rested. Ted had seen the Media late in the previous afternoon, and it was as bad as he expected. The media had gotten it all wrong, and so he simply gave them the straight details in a short synopsis. They weren't pleased that he poked holes in all their talking-heads theories of what happened. But, he reminded them that, though it wasn't as juicy as the idiots that didn't know what was going on had made out, it was still pretty dramatic.

Karen was still in Enclave, though she agreed that she should go back to work on Thursday. There was some question as to whether she'd keep her apartment or her rooms at Guest House. She had missed an appointment with her friend, Sharon, though. And the conversation on the phone about THAT – where she was and what she'd been doing – was worth the guilt trip that Sharon had tried to pull on her. She wondered if Sharon could take the training.

Jeff had been to two more companies, Tuesday afternoon, and dropped off his authorization as president of the companies. Again, he'd spoken to the secretaries who, much to his lack of surprise, already knew that he was taking over, was an Ambassador, and could do fantastic things. Sharon was better than television for getting the word out. What did surprise him was that the CEOs and CFOs of the companies ALSO knew. He was treated with respect, but NOT with fear for their jobs. And they understood why Muriel had decided to do it. Having a CEO try to buck the actual owner of the company was NOT a good way to improve one's resume.

Aslam and Nadeeda had been holed up in their suite since right after lunch, yesterday. Mata thought that it was probably an interesting discussion going on, concerning whether she should get back into law enforcement, and in what capacity. The assembled mass of friends that all happened to be in competing agencies had made an impact on her. And on him. She was looking for a good fit. He was simply having a fit. He didn't want to see her in danger, and didn't realize that THAT didn't pertain any more.

And now, a telephone call from the media claiming that Ted hadn't told the truth – that, in fact, it had been Muriel that had killed Kadivar. The reporter said that he'd received a phone call from Iran reporting that information and other things, like that the Envoys had killed the patients rather than cure them. Mata gathered the records from the Envoys that were holding station above Iran, and discovered the truth. It had been the military that had brought Kadivar out and turned him into a cadaver. And again, the patients that had been critically injured or ill had been brought out of the hospitals and executed. The Envoys also reported a small plane circling Tehran while those actions were taking place.

It was no great news to Mata that the Military would react like that to anyone that opposed them or that made use of Envoy techniques. It was the military that had been most against the admission of Envoys or anyone with Envoy training into the country. Envoys and Envoy training spelled freedom to ordinary people. The radical clerics in the country didn't want people to be free. They wanted them firmly under their thumb. So did the military, who saw themselves as the next leaders of Iran, once the radicals were killed off. So, Kadivar bringing in Muriel and the Envoys was anathema to them. It's very hard to intimidate someone that can't be threatened or killed. Or captured.

The mystery of the phone call, then, wasn't really a mystery at all. The number had been spoofed to look like it came from Iran, but actually came from Iraq. And the information was gathered from what the spotters in the plane saw, then 'massaged' to make it sound like it had been the Envoys and Muriel that had performed the deeds. However, the record from the Envoys holding station over Iran proved that the information the reporter had was bogus. Plus, the way the shield was constructed, there was no way that any cell, land-line or satellite phone could have communicated outside of Iran. The shield blocked all of it, including cutting the land-lines.

The most serious part of it, though was the radiation from the missile. Mata had no idea what to do about that. And that's where things stood when Muriel walked out of her office and over to Mata's desk.

"Radiation is part of the power that we handle. Bleed it off through a power connection, and turn it into something useful. Like fertilizer," Muriel said.

"What? Wait a minute! How did you know?"

"Oh, that. I'm as deep into you as you are to me. Oh, and thanks for the morning update. That makes things better," Muriel replied with a grin.

"YOU MINX! You've been holding out on me all this time. And I thought you were amazingly astute. Instead, you're just listening in to my mind, and gathering up the information I go over to see what's been missed!" Mata said.

"Well, of course. Just like you go through what I'm thinking about to see what kinds of problems I'm going to create, next," Muriel replied. "Oh, and thanks for the update on my balance. I didn't know that you could read it. Is it just me? Or is it anybody?"

"Just you. And how'd you know?"

"You were worried about it, yesterday afternoon, then you weren't. And then you explained it to Ted. Pretty good explanation, too. And I appreciate it. It calmed me right down, so I could see where my anger was coming from and eliminate it," Muriel said. "You're the best distraction a girl could have," she added, laughing. Mata just growled.

"Anyway, as for Nadeeda," Muriel went on. "I wouldn't worry about what the outcome is of her discussion with her husband. She'll be back in law enforcement, and I'd bet it would be

with Bob. Her real name is Nadine. And, according to Melanie, she was a terror. She was studying law enforcement in college when she met Aslam – I don't know what he was studying – and changed her name here, in America, before she was married. However, that didn't tame her, it just made her more circumspect about how she did things. But, back in this country and with Aslam going for citizenship, she'll revert, some. That's why I think she'll work with Bob. Which is not to say that Secret Service, FBI and State Police might not make use of her talents, sometimes. Anything else you want to know?"

"Muriel, go to your office and look busy," Mata said, suddenly serious. "No, don't turn toward the door. Just translate. Karen's coming and she has a friend. I'll put them in the casual area. There's something about the friend" Muriel got.

"Hi, Mata. This is Sharon. I was just showing her around. She took a vacation day from work so I could bring her out here to see Enclave and meet some of the people. Sharon, this is Mata. She works for Muriel, and she's an Envoy."

"Hi, Karen. Welcome to Enclave. What I do . . . well, my title is Security Chief for Muriel, but in reality I do a lot of other things, too. Like office manager, administrative assistant, and anything else either one of us can think of. You're the first secretary that Jeff talked to, aren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Not ma'am. Just Mata. I'm not somebody important. However, I'd bet that Muriel would like to meet you. She's busy right now, but should be free in a couple of minutes. Come on in the casual area. Would you like some coffee?"

"Yes, please."

"Oh, girl. We ARE going to have to train you out of that shyness. Come on." And Mata led the two into the casual area and got them seated just in time for Chuck to bring coffee, cream and sugar. "Chuck, this is Sharon. She's a friend of Karen's, and works for another car manufacturer that's in competition with the one Karen works for."

Chuck grinned. "Ah, competition. And two friends that work for the different companies. That must make life interesting for your bosses. In any case, I'm pleased to meet you. Welcome to Enclave."

"Should we be talking in here? We might disturb the Ambassador," Sharon whispered.

Suddenly, Muriel laughed and said, "Oh, TED! That was NASTY. That's as outrageous as some of the things I've pulled. But I'm glad it worked. Come on over for coffee. We've got a guest." And Ted translated in, startling Sharon. Muriel came around her desk and sat in her recliner.

"Well, Karen. I see you brought a friend," she said, smiling.

"Muriel, this is Sharon. She's a secretary for the competition. She's the one that Jeff saw first," Karen said.

"Ah! Yes. Sharon, you must forgive my friend for being so outrageous. Or, maybe not," Muriel said. "After all, I was the one that taught him to be, so maybe it's me you should blame. It's taken a while for Jeff to figure out what he wanted to do with his life, and to come out of his shell. It had to have been a bit of a shock to you, though, seeing him walk in in a gray uniform. Ted, tell Mata what you did."

"Oh, well, you know how that one reporter was beating us up about nobody seeing anyone monitoring Iran? And I told him they were stealthed and he poo-pooed it? Well, when I went to see that reporter, I made sure he was at his office," Ted said. "And you KNOW that it's more like a bull pen, just cubicles all over, and a high ceiling. I took Bart with me. Stealthed. So, I showed the reporter the record of the events that happened in Iran," Ted said, "and he's going, 'yea, sure, like I'm supposed to believe that they didn't see a bunch of people flying around above them'. And Bart, who had increased his size so that he had to bend his neck to fit under the ceiling, slowly became visible. The whole office saw it." As he spoke the last, Bart slowly appeared, head bent to avoid the ceiling and looking down at Sharon and Karen. Sharon gave a squeak, and Karen busted up laughing.

"Grab a chair, Bart. Have some coffee. Did you have to clean the poor guy's pants?" Muriel asked, as if this was a normal thing to her.

"Nope. He WAS startled, but not that much," Bart said, resuming his normal height and taking a seat. A coffee cup appeared in his hand. "I must say," he said, taking a sip, "that there are some human habits that I don't mind picking up. Never could understand what you saw in coffee, until I tried it." Sharon's eyes were still as big as saucers. "Relax, Sharon. I don't eat people. There's a bunch of other habits I never understood, either. But I'm learning, aren't I, my love?" he said to Mata, and she BLUSHED! Ted and Muriel just looked at each other, surprised.

"Mata?" Muriel said. "Is there something you'd like to tell me?"

"Nope. Uh, uh. Not saying a word," said Mata. "None of your business. I'm allowed a private life, too, you know. I don't pry into yours. Leave me alone."

"Uh, huh. I'm not upset, Mata. A bit surprised, maybe, but cheering you on. But, I thought you were my friend, and here you keep secrets from me," Muriel said.

"Beast," Mata said.

"Why Mata! I think you're embarrassed! I didn't think Envoys HAD emotions. At least, not until you got a body," Muriel said. And that's when it all hit the fan.

Karen grabbed Sharon's cup, put it down on the coffee table with one hand, and grabbed her friend's hand with her other one. Muriel was immediately beside Sharon on the other side, holding the girl's other hand. Fran popped in, took one look, and simply stood

there watching how it developed. Sharon was vibrating. Not really convulsing, but close to it.

“OK, Sharon. It's all right. Just let it happen. Look at me, girl. Come on, open your eyes. Look at me. It's just Muriel. Deep breaths, now. Slowly. That's it. Look around you. We're all friends, here. No one's going to hurt you. Come on back,” Muriel quietly chanted.

Slowly, the girl seemed to come back into focus. Finally, she blinked and said, “WOW! OK, what WAS that?”

“Why don't you tell me?” Muriel said, quietly and soothingly.

“It was like . . . I don't know . . . like an electric charge went through me, and suddenly I know things. Like . . . how to behave in some situations I've always felt uncomfortable with. It was when you said, ' At least, not until you got a body'. Then it hit me. Envoys are soul. Karen told me that. Humans are soul in a body. And suddenly I realized that the soul in a human was ENVOY!” Sharon said.

“Yep. Got it in one. What happened is that you connected to that soul. When humans are born, there isn't room in their mind for the Envoy. The human has to grow some, first. All this was meant to be automatic, but . . . well . . . that's a long story. What should have happened with people is that they would become aware of the soul over a long period of time. Years. But it didn't happen that way. The training was originally meant to try to bring that out,” Muriel said. “But we've discovered that some people are close to making the breakthrough, themselves, and that a reference to soul in body can trigger it. So, now you have a lot more experiences to draw on.”

“Does that mean that I can do the things that Jeff did?” Sharon asked.

“And much more. Jeff wasn't being really outrageous. Just baby stuff. You'll learn how to do them, too,” Muriel said. “And, you'll learn other things. You'll even get so you come up with new things, yourself. But right now, just relax and look around. We're all just people. Friends. We're on your side. We're not going to hurt you.”

“Why are you on your knees?” she asked. “Important people shouldn't be on their knees to me.”

“Oh, Sharon, there is NOTHING more important than a person finally realizing themselves,” Muriel said. “That's my job. Training people in Envoy techniques. The first job I had when I came to Enclave. It's even listed on my window. And I do whatever is necessary to accomplish it.”

“Nicely done,” said Fran. “I wasn't sure you knew how to ground her back into the real world like that. That's why I came.”

“I didn't,” Muriel said. “I just reacted. And it seemed right.”

“It was. Neatly done, Muriel. I couldn't have done better,” Fran replied. “So, let's finish

getting her through the basics. Karen can help, and that will teach HER how to do it. Shields first. She isn't wide open, but her shields are the old style."

"So, we need to get her trained. My apartment, I think. That way, we can keep the guys out," Muriel said. "And that way it can be a real hen party," she added, grinning. Muriel translated Fran, Sharon and Karen up to her apartment.

"They left us!" Ted said.

"Well, what do you expect?" asked Bart. "They're women."

"Watch it, wise guy!" said Mata. "You need us more than we need you."

"Uh, huh. Keep telling yourself that," Bart said. "Name one thing that you can do that we can't"

"Give birth," said Nadeeda, as she walked into the casual area.

"And if I want any lip out of you . . . oh. Oops," said Bart, looking at the uniform and badge.

"It would seem," Ted said, "That another thing women can do that men can't is stop a conversation just by walking in. Lunch, anyone?"

Chapter 19

Distinction

(Wednesday afternoon)

When Sharon and the giggling horde came back down from Muriel's apartment it was to find an empty casual area. Sharon was simply looking around, at Muriel, Karen, Fran, and the Envoys in the office with very wide eyes. Karen, for the most part, just looked smug.

"They went to lunch," Mata said.

"Well, they're men. They're always out to lunch," Muriel replied. "They think they're so important, but can't function without us and don't recognize that we are as capable as they are. Name one thing a man can do that a woman can't."

"Conception. Without us, no babies," Aslam said, walking into the casual area. "Has anybody seen my wife?"

"No, Aslam, we just got here, ourselves," Muriel said.

"Um . . . Aslam," said Mata, "she was here. She was wearing a uniform. And a badge."

"Yes, I know. I need to apologize to her," he said.

"I don't think it's going to help," Mata said. "She's back on her home ground, and the old behaviors have kicked back in."

"I know. That's what I need to apologize to her about," he said. "In Iran, she couldn't behave like this, and found other ways to make herself useful. Those ways are not appropriate here, and she needed another outlet. I didn't see it fast enough and became a . . . what you call . . . jerk. Young lady," Aslam said to Sharon, "you look at me in a strange way. Is it that I scare you?"

"N-no," she said. "It's just . . . everything is different." He looked at her, quizzically.

"She just connected, Aslam," Muriel said. "Suddenly, the world isn't the way she thought it was, and she's still adjusting."

"Ah. Yes, I can see that would be a problem. Is there anything that I can do?"

"N-no. Not really. It's just . . . all my life I felt that everybody else could do things that I couldn't. I was always just one of the little people – not important. And suddenly, I find myself able to do things that I never dreamed of. And the things I do! They're the same things, or at least the same sorts of things, that important people can do," Sharon said. "And suddenly I'm

WITH the important people, and they want me to treat them as equal. And I don't know how to behave."

"I will tell you the same thing that I used to tell the people I served. You are important. You have always been important," Aslam said. "Each person has their own abilities, and it is no shame that they are different than the abilities of others. The shame comes from their not being allowed to gain the knowledge necessary to use those abilities. And THAT shame is not yours, but belongs to those that would try to keep you down. So . . . it is wonder I see. Well, and that is good. You will feel more comfortable with it as you use your new abilities. In the mean time, just treat these important people the way you would treat friends, for that's what they are."

"But . . . they're important!" Sharon cried.

"But . . . they're people," Aslam said, gently. "And they need friends as much as you do. Do you not think that maybe there was a time when they were not important? They made themselves important by what they did. And so can you. In the mean time, they ARE friends, and wish YOU to be one, too."

"Me! I'm not anything special. I'm just . . . ME!"

"Ah, but 'just you' has changed. And now, 'just you' can do much more than you could. It is the whole purpose of education, to give people the opportunities that they didn't have, so that they can do more. Come, sit with me. I think we can work this out, and you can feel more comfortable. That is, if you don't mind sitting and talking with one that, only a few days ago, you would have looked on as an enemy," he said. Muriel took the hint, and went to her chair, and the others followed suit, finding places in her casual area. Even Mata came in and joined the group.

"Now then," he began. "I am Aslam. I was a religious leader, a follower of Mohamed and lived in Iran. My wife is American, and her name is Nadeeda. But, Muriel's training has changed all that. And now, I find that I must find a new job to do. Will you tell me about you?"

"Oh, my name is Sharon, and I'm a secretary," she said.

"Well, in my experience, there are different types of secretaries. Would you tell me more? What is it that you do, and who for?"

"Oh, just typing things, and taking phone calls. I work for the CEO and CFO of the company. I really don't do too much."

"So, you type their letters, correct their spelling and maybe make their sentences more understandable. And, you file? Yes? And take phone calls and direct them to the right people. Do you also set up the appointments for people?" he asked.

"Oh, sure. But that's really nothing."

“And, of course, you make the calls for your bosses to set up appointments for them with people outside the company,” Aslam said. “And you know the right people to call or write to to get things done, like motivating suppliers to make deliveries on time.”

“Well, sure, that's part of it,” Sharon said.

“I believe what you're trying to say, Aslam, is that she's more than just a secretary. She's an Administrative Assistant,” Mata said.

“Ah, yes. And, of course, she makes the coffee,” Aslam said.

“Well, actually, with the new ones, I don't make coffee. Do they eat or drink?” Sharon asked. Mata just held up her cup, then a bowl of popcorn. Sharon blushed.

“Yea, many Envoys eat and drink. We don't sleep, as such, but we do have 'down time' to let our minds sort things out in the background. Something Muriel initiated when she first came here,” Mata said. “Basically, she treats us like people. She understands that we have different personalities, different likes and dislikes, different talents, and no bodies. She also understands that we feel that we should not be in charge, despite all these amazing things we can do, because we don't have the experience to handle that position. She, at twelve, was better equipped to be the boss than any of us, so we followed her.”

“Sharon,” Aslam said, “there are people that can only be a 'boss' by making sure others believe themselves less than they are. They do this by subtly putting other people down, making them do humiliating or degrading things. Embarrassing them, publicly. Even just a job title can do that, unless the target is strong enough to have a good self-image to begin with. Words are slippery. Choose the right words, and your job becomes something either menial or important. And people that want to feel important make use of such words. Unfortunately, such people that have or generate poor opinions of others, often become bosses and further degrade their employees by having them do demeaning tasks. Making coffee or taking out trash. Cleaning bathrooms. Running errands, that are personal for the boss and not part of the business.”

“Sharon,” Fran spoke up. “I know what it's like to be constantly put down. In my case it wasn't a boss. It was my own father, and my mother went along with it. When I asked Betty for the courses to be an Envoy style doctor, I also asked her for the psychology and sociology courses so I could better understand what I'd been put through. And it took four years to get over it, if, in fact, I'm actually over it. I still have moments when I feel that I'm 'not doing enough' or 'not good enough'. And all because my father had to feel that he was better than everybody else. And when I took the Envoy training it all came to a head. I made the 'mistake' of saving him from being attacked by a dog. I used Envoy techniques to do it – first shields to keep the dog away from him, then making a mental link and making the dog realize that it was not a good idea to attack people. My father threw me out of the house, so I came here. THEN, after some time of thinking the worst about myself, I'd had enough. I realized that I was ME, and not their little puppet, and I struck back.”

“Basically,” she continued, “I disowned my parents, legally. I became emancipated

under adult supervision. I showed that I had a job – by then I was a doctor as well as being an Ambassador – a place to stay, food to eat, clothing to wear, and medical attention when I needed it. My parents tried to haul me back as a runaway, and when that didn't work, tried to take me to court to force me to return to them and their stupid ideas of what I should be like. The court effectively laughed at them. Muriel stepped in, too. That particular religion is GONE. It's leaders were jailed, and the religion, itself, dissolved. The people were treated to what you just went through – the judgment. As a result, they all turned to other forms – something to add comfort to their lives. People that would build themselves up by tearing down other people are, in effect, bullies. And we don't tolerate that. We don't think that the bullies should win, and we do something about it whenever we find them. And we WILL help you to understand that you are individual, unique, and have worth, if you will let us.”

“Sharon, we're offering you the same thing that we offered Karen. Now that you can translate from place to place, there's no reason why you can't live here. We can have a room in Guest House set up for you, free. That's not special, we do it with all guests and trainees. Also, any meals, anywhere in Enclave are free. Likewise any medical attention. Clothes you can already do for yourself. But new ones, you can go to any of the clothing stores here and the Envoys there will be happy to help you create the image for them, no charge. Entertainment – we do have movies and concerts, here. Even plays and such. ALL free to you. It's the same package that I've got, by the way. Is that special enough for you? Is that enough to convince you that you ARE somebody important and special?”

“Why are you doing this?” Sharon asked.

“Because we can,” Muriel said. “Because we care about you. Because you're important to us. Because you're special in the world. But mostly, just because we can.”

“Oh.”

“So, is that special enough for you? You've got the same basic instruction that I do, and everybody else after me has had,” Muriel said. “Now, what you do with it will be individual to you. Oh, we'll teach you some tricks we've learned along the way. But we don't know your job, or where you're going from here. We've got courses in a lot of things – PhD level courses, by the way – that you can request at any time. They take anywhere from zero to three days to open up so that they're useful. You can talk to anybody about the training. You may not be believed, but don't let that bother you. And, you can train others. It's suggested that before you do it alone, you ask for help. At least an Envoy to monitor and assist. They're more than happy to do it. They WANT the training to be out there. Or, ask me. I may not be able to help directly, but I can make sure you've got someone who CAN help you. So, how's that for special and important. You can talk directly to the Leader of Home. Kinda like being able to walk up to the President and talk with him, huh?”

“Oh, wow! I can really contact you if I need to?” she asked.

“Yep. Realize, though, that I may be busy at the time, and not able to handle your questions right at the time. Things get rather intense around here, sometimes,” Muriel said with a smile. “You can ask Ted or any of my friends about that. They were in on most of

them. We did things as KIDS that most adults, even in the military, would never even have to think about. And we did them almost literally 'on the fly'."

"We've also got records of all the incidents, and you're welcome to see them," Mata said. "However, that's not getting you the courses you need. Let me call Betty."

"No need. I was monitoring," Betty said. "I think, for now, I'll give you the same courses I gave Karen. That's an Administrative Assistant course, and the PhD level MBA. I really shouldn't call it that. MBA is the American term, and stands for Master of Business Administration. Our course goes as far beyond that as an MBA goes beyond basic math. It includes some psychology and sociology, and a few other things. Now, if you're closely connected to your soul, you'll be able to just pass them to it, and be able to use them immediately. If not, then it could take a couple of days. Or, if you aren't that well connected, maybe we can help you GET connected."

"Is there a way to tell?" asked Sharon.

"Yes, if you let me link to you, I can tell pretty quickly," Betty said. Sharon agreed, and Betty linked, then came right back out. "You're connected, hard. So, just look at something blank for a few minutes. A blank spot on the wall, Muriel's face, anything that won't distract you," Sharon giggled, "and you'll be all set." Sharon chose a blank spot on the wall. She didn't dare look at Muriel's face, for fear she break up laughing. And a minute later Betty said, "That's it. You've got the whole thing. Now, think about your job, and see where it would apply."

Sharon looked thoughtful for a while, then said, "I need to call work. I think I need a day or so off, and I've got the vacation time to cover it. They're always complaining that I never take any, so now's their chance."

"Why don't you let ME call," Muriel said, and pulled her phone out of a 'no pocket'.

"As many times as I've seen that, it still startles me," Sharon said. "It's like magic. I KNOW how it's done, and I've done it myself. And it's STILL spooky."

Muriel just smiled. "It'll pass. Hold on," she added. Then, "Hello? This is Ambassador Muriel, the Leader of Home. I'd like to speak to the Chief Executive Officer, please. No, I won't hold. Get him, or I'll come out there and replace him and you. Thank you. Sir? I have your secretary here, in Enclave, and she's going to need some time off. She just took the Envoy training, and it takes a little time to readjust to it. Really! I think otherwise."

"Karen, I'm going to ask you to sit this one out. Mata, one squad in Class 'A' uniforms. Sharon, you're coming with me. Oh, and Mata, we'll need replacements for the CEO and CFO, and someone to take Sharon's place until she returns. Why do we always end up with the dunderheads when we hire humans for supervisory positions? And to think that we just had to replace two previous jerks. We should have left the Envoys in charge!" With that, she stood up and had Sharon stand, and they blinked out.

And appeared in the CEO's office. "Mister, when I tell someone to do something, I expect it to be done. Immediately. I don't accept excuses and I especially don't accept people talking back to me. And I don't care how long or short a period of time you've been here. You're expected to know who your boss is. You're done. Squad, help him gather his things and escort him off the property. Mata, would you see if we could get the two that filled in for a couple of days to come back? Thanks. Now, let's talk to that secretary, as she calls herself." They walked out of the office to the secretary's desk.

"Who the hell are you and how'd you get in here?" the woman asked.

"Your boss, and I got in by translating from the Enclave out near Phoenix, Arizona," Muriel replied.

"Yea, right. Tell me another one. It's a good four hours by plane. And you're not my boss. He just walked out of here with a bunch of other people."

"Those with Envoy training don't bother with planes. And as for being your boss, I OWN the company. I'm Ambassador Muriel, the Leader of Home. And you're fired. Get your things and get out. Now," Muriel said, her eyes beginning to glow black.

The eyes must have had some effect on the woman, since she shot out of her seat, grabbed her things and RAN out of the building. Two Envoys exited the CEO'S office, and a third, female, appeared next to the desk. All three were grinning.

The third, the woman, went over to Sharon. "May I link to you? It'll make it easier for me to hold down your job until you get back." At Sharon's nod, she went on, "Oh, good. You've got the same training I do. And you've thought a bit about how to make your job easier and better. I can start that for you, if you like. And there's the contact list, and the department heads, Ah, yes. Oh, this'll be easy. Thank you. Now, would you like me to start the reorganization? I can feed back what I've done, just as you fed me what you do."

"You can do that?"

"Now that I know what you have in mind, and what you based it on, of course," the Envoy said.

In the mean time, the other two had gone to Muriel, who explained what she wanted them to do. "There was no problem with our coming back, Muriel. We're happy to do it. I think I'm glad Sheri got the information from Sharon," one said, indicating the female Envoy. "That will make it easier to find out what we need to know."

"What? Why?" asked Sharon.

"Because the secretary knows the schedule and what needs to be done, and where to find it," he said. "Relax, with what you just fed Sheri this will be a snap." Sharon just looked at him with wonder.

“You didn't realize, did you?” Muriel asked. “The secretaries may not make the decisions, but they know where everything is, and can GUIDE the decisions. You were much more important to them than they let on. And it's why I sacked them. They were miffed because I pulled you out for a couple of days for training, and the temporary secretary they hired couldn't keep up with what was going on. So, they blamed you. NOT good. Not the way to deal with the problem. And that won't happen again, here. Let's get back. I'm glad we ate before we went back to the office, but I feel in need of more coffee.”

Chapter 20

Realization

(Wednesday afternoon, late)

"Wait," Sharon said, and turned to the CEO and CFO. "Here's what you need to know for the next week," she added, and dumped the load on them. "I should be back before that's finished. If not, or if you have any problems with it, let me know and I'll see what I can do." She turned to Sheri. "I'm not trying to do your job. It's just, well, the previous bosses I've had never told me how important what I was doing was. But I used to set up their day for them and keep thing running straight. Instead of just a day, though, I gave these men the whole week. That should leave you free to handle the reorganization. And thank you for offering. Here's what I had in mind, but feel free to improve on it, if you can see a way to."

"No problem," Sheri said. "I can do that, easily. I'll make sure you know what I've done when you get back."

"NOW we can go," she said to Muriel, who was smiling in a strange way. "Why the look?" Sharon asked.

"Because I think I may have just found the next CEO for this company," Muriel said. "You're starting to take charge. That's good, and what I'd hoped would happen."

"Oh, no! I'm just a secretary. This is just information that a secretary would have."

"Uh, huh. Think about it," Muriel said, and translated them back to Enclave, but not to her office.

"Where are we?"

"Guest House. You'll need a room for a couple of days," Muriel said. "Maybe longer, if you like the service," she added, cryptically. As they walked in, the manager came out from behind the desk and greeted Muriel.

"And this must be our newest trainee. Welcome to Guest House. Mata alerted me to your coming, so you're all registered in. Anything you need, just tell the Envoys for your room. They know where everything in Enclave is and how to get it," he said in one mad rush.

"Don't you need my credit card, or something?" asked Sharon.

"Oh, no ma'am. This is covered by Enclave. Our salute to you on your achievement, and our pleasure to provide," he replied.

"You didn't believe me, did you?" Muriel said, laughing.

“Not really. Sorry.”

“Don't be. Think how I felt when they started training me, and suddenly wanted me to design my office and apartment,” Muriel laughed. “And for weeks, I thought Mata was actually in charge, and I was just reacting to situations as they came up. Come to find out, I was establishing policy for what Enclave would do and how it would react for the future. So, tell me. How do you feel about wearing gray?”

“Huh? Why should I wear gray?” asked Sharon.

“Let's go see your room,” Muriel said, changing the subject, and the manager led the translation to the room, bringing them to the hall in front of the door, so Sharon could see the room number and orient on the location in the hall.

“Please open the door,” he said to her. “That's what keys the room to you, so others can't get in without your permission. Even by translation. The Envoys, of course, will come whenever you call, or when you're out to clean the room for you. Just as normal maid service in a regular hotel, but with the added benefit of their being on call for your requests.”

“They're also knowledgeable about Enclave and what it has, as well as happy to talk about the differences between Envoys and humans,” Muriel said. “You'd be surprised at what they know or can find out.”

“I've heard of hotels that claimed to have the best service in the world that didn't have service like this,” Sharon said. The Manager just grinned.

“If you decide to stay here, you would be moved to a suite of rooms that includes a kitchen, guest room, and a separate living room. Actually an apartment. Of course, at no cost to you,” he said. “We enjoy serving trainees. Oh, the Envoys assigned to this room would go with you, so you wouldn't have to get used to new ones. Rooms like this are just for short stays.”

Sharon opened the door, and felt like she'd fallen into a fantasy. It wasn't just a bedroom and bath. A large area was for entertaining, complete with large, wide screen television and surround sound speakers. Almost incidental to the entertainment center were the couch and two recliners, and coffee table between them. On the wall opposite the TV was a wet bar and kitchenette suitable for snacks and small lunches. And on the other side of that wall was the bathroom. Past the large living area, near a large window that looked out on the mountains, was a bed big enough for four people. Lighting was indirect, but filled the room so that there were no dark corners. Except that what seemed like one turned out to be two female Envoys, patiently waiting for her to see that they were there.

As Sharon saw and turned toward the Envoys, they introduced themselves, and one asked what she would like. “A man,” Sharon breathed, and the other one promptly turned into one. THAT set Sharon blushing and laughing, and even got a chuckle out of Muriel.

“Be careful what you wish for,” Muriel said. “You just might get it. Envoys have no

gender, so they can assume any shape they need to, to do a job.”

“I WAS kidding,” Sharon said. “I’m going to have to make sure you’re not around and the ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign is out when I go to bed.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” said the one that had turned into a man, as he turned back. “With no gender, there’s no reactions like a human male would have. What interests us is your mind. We knew you were joking, and I couldn’t resist joking back.”

“So, you’re saying that you pulled the prank just to see how I would react – to get a glimpse of how I think,” Sharon said.

“Well . . . some, maybe. Mostly, it was just a joke,” he/she replied.

“Miss Sharon, I’ll be happy to have another pair of Envoys attend you,” the Manager said.

“No.” Sharon said. “No, we’re going to work this out. And we WILL work it out, or I’ll take you up on your offer. But first, I’d like to try. It might be to both our benefit, sir. And right now, it’s getting close to dinner time, and I’d like to explore this room a bit – get the feel of it. Muriel, I want to thank you for what you’ve done for me, today. I think I’ve learned more in one day than I have in my whole life before this. One of the things you showed me is that I have to stand up for myself. Well, here’s my chance to start. So . . . thank you, and I’ll see you tomorrow morning.” Muriel just smiled, gathered the Manager, and they left. She knew a dismissal when she heard one.

“Now, let’s talk. Where do you go when you’re not ‘attending’ me?”

“There’s a break room, downstairs. It has everything we need, including friends to talk to, food, drink, a place to relax and unwind if we need to,” the one that had remained a woman said. “There are only three ways that we can enter the room. Either you call us, or there has to be an emergency, or normal maid service when you’re out. Jessie and I have had situations where a client was in an emergency situation. We arrived, and performed first aid until a doctor could arrive. That doctor, by the way, is a friend of Muriel’s, and saved a man who had a heart attack – his heart actually stopped – and he’s still up and around and active. And she did it as her first major medical work, and on the recliner in Muriel’s office.”

“Ouch! That had to be tough. Was the recliner replaced? Or just recovered?”

“Neither,” she said. “This wasn’t like human surgery. She and two of her team simply found the problems and solved them. He was still fully dressed, five minutes later, when they finished.”

“Oh,” Jessie said, “What Lori didn’t say is that, when we’re up here, we’re ALWAYS visible. To be otherwise would make our client nervous. Actually, that was the mistake I made. I made you nervous. I shouldn’t have. You’d have every right to ask that I be replaced by someone else.”

"Yes. I could," Sharon said. "But then I'd be forever wondering. Whereas, with you two, IF we can work things out, I'll know where I stand, and you'll know where you stand. I wouldn't have that with a new pair. Does that make sense to you?"

"Actually, it does. What you're saying is that I'm still suspect," Jessie said, "but on parole pending my good behavior. I mess up again, and I'm gone. But, if I can prove myself to you, somehow, you'll lift the parole. Something like that?"

"I think that about sums it up," Sharon said. "And can you see why I'd prefer to stick with you instead of a new pair?"

"Yes. With a new pair, you'd still be nervous. OK," Jessie said, "how can we make it un-nervous for you?"

"By doing your job. Part of which, now, is telling me what that job is and how you do it. Then we can work out any nervous making parts of it between us, so that neither one of us is inconvenienced," Sharon said.

"Oh. OK. What we do is establish a light link to the client. All humans radiate, some. Not enough for another human to pick up, and not enough for an Envoy to read. Just enough that, if you are thinking about needing us, we can show up. We don't do thoughts unless you specifically initiate a link, and then only as deep as you allow. And we can show you how to be sure of that, if you haven't already been taught that," Lori said.

"After that, it's a matter of what you want," Jessie added "Showing you how everything works, of course. Getting food and drink for you, or telling you or showing you where the restaurants are and what kind of food they provide. Same with theaters, museums and such. And yes, we can guide outside of Guest House. There's a pair of Envoys for every room in the building, so there's never a time when you might want us and we'd be busy with someone else. We can even tell you what's available on television. And ANY movie can be ordered. There was a major fight with the representatives of the movie producers over our having that ability. The fight ended with a whimper on their part when they found out that we had paid up contracts that covered every movie, and for every television and theater in Enclave. The whimper was because Muriel and Ted counter-sued them and won. The representatives of the movie producers effectively no longer exist."

Lori picked back up after that. "There have been clients who didn't know anyone in Enclave, and weren't trained, and we've provided companionship for them. Really, Sharon, the list of things we normally do, or CAN do, is pretty long. We try to be the ultimate servants, with abilities and skills that no human servant without the training can even approach. And we've yet to see a trained human that was 'just a servant'. Every one we've seen trained has become something spectacular. That man that I told you about? He was the Secretary of Education, and is still on the job. And trained. He's the reason that courses from the University of Home are recognized as accredited. He even pushed the licensing organizations so that Jeff and Fran can work outside Enclave in their professions. Even that first aid course that everyone that's trained gets is recognized as valid. And that took some

lawsuits, too.”

“So . . . you tell us what limitations you want to put in place, so that you won't be nervous any longer, and we'll comply,” Jessie said, when they finally ran down.

“I'm not sure there are any, beyond just don't be here when I'm in the bathroom or going to bed,” Sharon said. “What you've told me is pretty comprehensive. So, we'll just count it as a joke that went wrong. I'm only staying a couple more days, anyway. Then, I don't know what will be happening. Muriel said that I can commute from here simply by translating back and forth. That's a possibility. But I also have friends back there. I'm just not sure what to do.”

“Well, if it makes any difference to you, if you decide to stay, you'd be moved to a larger suite. And we'd go with you, if you like. It's what's normally done, when a client is used to a pair of Guest House Envoys. In fact, the only time I know of when it didn't happen was when Fran moved in. She had her squad, so Guest House Envoys weren't used at all. And when she moved out, THEY went with her, of course,” Lori said. “They're all doctors, of course. But they're also so much more. They've babied her ever since she got a full squad. And her guardian from before that became her security chief, and took the doctor courses, herself.”

“Wait a minute. It just hit me. You're talking about that young girl that's a friend of Muriel's, and was with me when I connected to my soul, then went on to train me, aren't you!”

“Of course.”

“Just how old was she when she saved that man's life?”

“Oh, that was just a few months after they all came here and turned our lives upside down. She was twelve,” Lori said.

“TWELVE? You've got to be kidding!”

“Nope,” Lori said. “They were in the last year of elementary school when they came here. And it was only a matter of a couple of months after that when her father threw her out of the house. It was shortly after that that she took the medical courses and started following Mark around, then started taking on the smaller cases around Enclave. That was also about the time that all Muriel's friends got offices of their own, and full squads. Fran was in her office when she got Muriel's mental shout, and he was already on the recliner, and it was flattened out. By the way, the same mechanism that is in Muriel's recliner is in yours. It worked so well, that we've used it in all of them since. Styles change, but the mechanism is the same. This will flatten out into a pretty comfortable bed. And the arm rests act like the side rails of a hospital bed, to keep you from falling out.”

“That's impossible!”

“Nope,” said Lori. “Just good design. In fact, we could probably sell recliners like this”

"No, I mean that a twelve year old should be a doctor. Who'd trust her at that age?" Sharon demanded.

"Kids. She was able to talk their language," Lori said. "Which means that she DIDN'T say 'AW, you got a bubo'. Instead, she talked softly – well, she does that, anyway, unless she's really upset – and assures the kid that things will be all right. And all the time she's repairing the damage, then applies a bandage just to show where the scrape, cut, or whatever was. Kids come back another time, and want to say 'hi' to Doctor Fran. Her skill and competence make her one of the best advertisements for Envoy training that we've had. Beside Muriel, that is."

"And the government allowed this?"

"The government is Muriel. Oh, and Ted. But Muriel's the one everyone follows. She farmed the licensing off to Mark. Mark showed up at that heart attack, and just stood by and narrated what was happening. And I've seen the record, so I know. He let her do the work, because she was doing so well. Everything was organized and ran like clockwork. Five minutes, and he was sitting up, and NOT in any pain," Jessie said. "Mark declared her a full fledged doctor right there. Oh, she still asked questions when she was unsure, or asked for help at times. But essentially, she was on her own, because Mark felt that she was competent to make good decisions."

"By the way, you've seen Muriel and how gentle she is. Don't let it fool you. She's a target, and she knows it. She's tough as nails, and nasty as a mama panther with kits. She's killed, when she thought it was necessary. She's also saved Envoys that everyone thought were beyond saving. One of them works in her office. Not because she wants to keep an eye on him, but because he's the best analyst that there is. And she values his work. She has compassion – REAL compassion, not the slobbery stuff you may be accustomed to. And she can act, and correctly, in an instant in emergencies. And no one is sure how she does it," Lori added.

"Well, this isn't getting us fed. Or me, if you don't eat. So, what's available in Enclave?" Sharon asked.

"We eat. I think most of the Envoys in Enclave do, now. Oh, it doesn't mean the same to us as it does to you. We don't have to. But we've learned to enjoy tastes, odors, colors, and textures. Partly from association with humans and partly simply by exposure to foods. And you can have pretty much anything you want," Jessie said. "Why don't you start by thinking of what type of food you want, and we'll go from there. And do you want to go out, or eat here?"

"Here, I think. And I'd like you to join me, please."

Chapter 21

Rationalization (Thursday morning)

"Ted, what IS this mess," asked Muriel.

"It would appear that the portion of the population of Iran that went to college got together and pulled a coup. We don't have all the details, yet, but our observers can't find any Shi'ite clergy anywhere in the country. And the military seem to be taking orders from someone that is NOT military," he replied. "We can't understand it – in fact, at this point, we aren't even trying to – so we're just observing to see what happens."

"Were any of the Envoys able to convert the radiation from their failed missile launch?"

"Oh, that. Yea. And exactly as you said. They bled it off as power and converted it to fertilizer, which actually made some people very happy. But this," Ted said, shaking his head. "There's no explanation. There's no violence that we can see, the gangs that WERE doing all the violence seem to have just disappeared. And now this. College students and graduates, professional people, have somehow managed to do something. Hospitals are running again. Food is being distributed. Police and fire departments are operating. Utilities are on, and where disrupted, are being repaired. And the Military are NOT in the government buildings. It's uncanny."

"Um . . . Ted," Mata cut in. "We didn't do it."

"Do what?"

"Convert the radioactivity. We didn't do it. But it's done," Mata said.

"That's ridiculous! It would either have to be an Envoy or a trained human that made the conversion. And there were no trained humans in Iran. They wouldn't let us in to train anyone. And all the Envoys that went in with me came out with me. The shield wall was put up by Envoys from Home from OUTSIDE!" Muriel said.

"Well, either one or more slipped in, or we've got something much worse on our hands," said Mata.

"What could be worse?"

"Breakthrough. Someone that connected without our help and knowledge. And, therefore, without our controls," Mata said.

"And you think they could be a threat to us?" Muriel asked.

"It's happened before," Mata reminded her. "True, it was Envoys, and they didn't have the spark of inspiration that humans have. But, a human breakthrough, especially one that was intelligent, could start a whole new way of doing things that could be a threat to us."

"Oh, great. Just what we need. Another threat."

"Maybe not. If it was a breakthrough, then he had to have connected to his soul," Mata said.

"He? You know this?"

"No," Mata replied. "Just a guess. It's a male dominated society. Can you see them submitting to the rule of a female? It's one of the reasons that they wouldn't accept you or the Envoys in Iran."

"Good point. Any way to contact him?" asked Muriel.

"Not yet. And believe me, we're trying. But it's like he's not there, or . . . I can't really explain it," Mata said.

"OK. When you have a problem, take it apart to it's components and solve the components. You say it's like he's not there. What do you mean?"

"We get edges of thoughts. We try to track them back and they disappear."

"He's shielding," Muriel said. "He can feel you trying to catch the thoughts and blocks you. OK. That's a piece of information. Can anyone see what he has done?"

"Not really," Mata replied. "There are areas that we can't see unless we blast our way in. And I didn't think you wanted that."

"Another piece of information. OK, WHERE can't you see in?"

"Um . . . the University," Mata said.

"What? The whole thing?"

"Oh, no. Just an area. A room in the dorm. But that makes no sense!" Mata said.

"Maybe. Don't try to analyze it, yet. Just accept it. Now, WHY can't you see in there?"

"It's like we're pushed away. Like . . . like we want to avoid the area," Mata said.

"Good. Another piece of information. Can you describe the shields?"

"Square. OH! They're the old style. You KNEW!"

"I expected," Muriel said. "If it was a breakthrough, then the soul would know how to shield, but they'd be the old style shields. So, that pretty much tells us what we're facing. Can someone give me an image of the area? Good. OK, great. The rooms are set up as mirrors, and I know what the ones on either side look like, so I can surmise the rough layout of the one that's hidden. Mata, I'm going to need a squad, my age and all female, for this caper."

"You're not going in there, are you?"

"With the new shields and a squad around me? Why not?" Muriel said. "We need to know what happened. And if it's a breakthrough, she could be very confused, and need help."

"She? I thought you'd decided that it was a 'he'?"

"No, you did, from the fact that it's a male dominated society. Look at the dorm, separated from the others, and much smaller. Look in the rooms around the hidden one. All girls, and not much older than I am. It's a girl in there, and she's scared," Muriel said.

"I'm coming with you," Mata said.

"No, Mata," Muriel said, looking at her. "Not this time. If something goes wrong, then you're going to have to train another Ambassador to take my place. Fran or Don, maybe. They've both got the strength for it."

"You're expecting trouble, aren't you."

"Not really," Muriel said. "I think there's a very scared girl in there, and that she may have done some things she's ashamed of. Instead of rage, I think it was fear that caused the connection. Which means she probably thinks she's going mad, because it feels like there's someone else in her head. And I think she's going to see me and the squad, and freak. It's going to take a lot of power to translate in through that shield. So, we'll be going in glowing like that nasty word that starts with an 'A'. Heck, it'll take power just to see inside it enough to translate in. And then it's going to take some time to calm her down. I'll see if I can bring her out, bring her here, where we can talk. Chuck, you make a very pretty girl," she added with a snicker. He mock cuffed her, and grinned. "OK, once I get an image we're going to have to go in fast, so she can't find a way to block us."

Muriel began to glow as she patiently tried to get glimpses of the room behind the imperfect shielding. Despite her passing what information she could get to the squad, they, too, were glowing from the effort as they passed back information that they got. Suddenly, they were gone. And the first thing they heard was a scream.

Peace, Muriel sent. **Don't be afraid. We won't hurt you. We're here to help you.** The girl huddled on the couch under the window, as the glow from the squad and Muriel subsided.

The girl muttered an Arabic word, trembling.

::She thinks we're angels,:: Chuck said, chuckling.

"You have nothing to fear," Muriel said in Farsi, walking toward her. "We want to help you. Please. Talk to us. Let us help you." She knelt on one knee so as to be less imposing. "What is your name?"

"You do not know? Do not the angels of Paradise know everything?" the girl asked.

"Not even close," said Muriel, laughing. "They know much, but not everything. Why are you huddled in fear in this room?"

"I am Ameera. I . . . I am afraid. There is something in my head. I don't understand."

"It's all right, Ameera. I know what it is, and soon, you will, too. I am Muriel. I am human. But I know what is in your head, and I know that it won't hurt you. Let me tell you a little thing about being human and about what you call angels. Angels are soul. Pure soul. They have no bodies. So, they can appear as they like, or as they need to to perform their duties. Humans have a body. But they have more than just a body. Humans, too, are a soul. Where does the soul of a human come from?" The girl just shook her head, staring at Muriel. "Come on, Ameera, think about it. You can do that. You are intelligent, or you wouldn't be in the University. Where does the human soul come from?"

And the girl trembled even more. It only went on for a minute or two, then she opened her eyes and looked at Muriel. "You know," she said, in wonder. "You know about human souls."

"Yes," Muriel said. "And now, so do you. That's what's been trying to protect you and guide you. And we knew it was your soul because of the shields on the room. They were an older style, which would be right considering it has been out of touch with other messengers for so long. We call them Envoys. And the five behind me are just that – Envoys. I'm sorry we frightened you when we came in."

"But . . . how do you do that? You just appeared, bright, like all angels are said to be."

"Oh, that. Part of the training we offer those that have the ability to learn. YOU have that ability, if you'd like to learn. You would learn to talk with others, like we do, learn to travel like we do. Learn to protect yourself. Would you like that, Ameera?" Muriel was mostly just talking to soothe the girl, now, but it seemed to have some affect.

"I? I could travel like the angels?" she asked.

"Yes, Ameera. Anywhere that you can think of. And it's not difficult. We will teach you how, and guide you until you are confident in yourself. But we cannot force you to learn. YOU have to want to," Muriel said.

"I am not worthy of such teaching. I . . . I think I have done some bad things."

::Muriel,:: Chuck sent. ::we have her signature, now. She's the reason things quieted down so quickly. Actually, it's her soul's signature, because it wasn't fully connected to her, so it was acting on its own to try to protect her. Some men came in the dorm for, well, what men sometimes do when they think the rules no longer apply. They tried to take her, and her soul sent them to Home. She was afraid others would come, so those that were violent and would do such things, she also sent to Home. That included the leaders of the military. And there are shields all over the place."

::What you're telling me is that, if I can pull her out of her fear, we may have found the Ambassador for this poor country,:: Muriel sent back. ::OK, we've got to get her out of here. Will the shields hold, or do we need to duplicate them before we leave?::

::Already being done. I signaled the observer Envoys, and they're putting them in place, now.::

"Ameera, I would like to take you to my home . . . get you away from here for a while, so that you can feel safe. So that you can learn. Will you come see my home?" asked Muriel, gently.

"I . . . you say that to get me to go face my Judgment."

"No, I say that because my home is a safe place for you, where you won't have to be afraid. Oh! I understand. No, not to what you call Paradise. My home is in America. And, there are others like me all over the world, now. Come, see a portion of America, and see what people CAN be like. Come meet more Envoys, and understand that there is nothing to fear from us," Muriel said.

"I have no choice, do I?" Ameera said. "The angels have come for me and I must go."

"You do have a choice, but it a rather bleak one. I have not heard of anyone successfully making the connection, alone. The risk is too great that we would lose you, forever," Muriel said. "Many good people have managed to go to Home and face their judgment, and come back alive. Not just me. My friends, my parents, many, many others. It takes some training, and sometimes some looking at yourself and seeing what can be changed for the better. But it can be done. And we all help those who are willing to learn. We offer you help all along the way. Help to learn the techniques, and help to learn yourself."

"I doubt that there is any help you can give one such as I," she said. "But I will go with you for the chance. I can only hope that it is enough." And, that said, Muriel gathered up the squad and the young lady and translated them back to her office.

The squad went to the break room. Muriel and Ameera when to her casual area. In moments, Chuck was back in his normal form, offering coffee to both of them. And Muriel had to chuckle.

"Why do you laugh?" asked Ameera.

"This one. You've seen him before, and don't realize it. He is the leader of one of my squads. In fact, he was the leader of the squad that came to get you. Form doesn't matter to Envoys," Muriel explained, "and I felt that you would feel less threatened by young women being around you."

"This? Was a girl?" Ameera asked.

"I am an Envoy," Chuck said. "I am soul without body. Thus, I can change to suit the needs of the moment. I just wish Muriel hadn't said that I made a pretty girl," he added, changing back to the female version of himself.

"You do. I didn't know that angels could do that!"

"We prefer the term 'Envoy'. It still means 'messenger', but without the unfortunate religious connotations," he said, changing back.

"And what did Muriel mean when she said that you were the leader of one of her squads?"

"Just that," Chuck replied. "Four squads, under the leadership of a security chief, were given to her to protect her. Well, originally to protect her. That was when she first came here to be trained, and we had no idea how long it would take. As it turned out, it took two days of actual work, but spread out over four days. Then, she started teaching US. Even before she was fully trained. She found new ways of doing things – better ways – and has been teaching us ever since. So, we work for her."

"You . . . work for her."

"Of course. And it's fun. It's also challenging and sometimes exciting," Chuck said. "But, I'm most appreciated for my cooking."

"You . . . COOK?"

"Sure. All sorts of stuff. Well, actually, anymore, what I do would be called 'creating meals'. If they're meals I know well, I can turn out six in about five minutes. Sometimes even less time than that. After all, all it really is just changing energy into matter," he said.

"Now I KNOW you're lying," she said. "NOBODY can change energy into matter. It's against the laws of nature. Matter can turn into energy, sometimes explosively. But the other way can't be done."

"Actually, it's done all the time, on a slower scale. Trees and plants do it through photosynthesis. And there's other ways. I just do it faster. So can any Envoy, or those that are Envoy trained," he said. "At it's most basic in the training, it's how Muriel and others make their uniforms and clothing. The process goes through an intermediary stage – we use

shields to do it, power converted to shields, that is – then from shields to actual objects.”

“All the theories created by physicists and scientists are just that,” Muriel said. “Theories. We deal in a higher reality than they realize. And you'll get to see some of those realizations. First, we'll get your shields straightened out. Then it's on to how to use them, starting with clothing. Then, it's on to how to go from one place to another without passing through all the bits in between. Most of this your soul already knows. So most of it will be simply allowing you to practice it. Shields are the real difference.”

“Can I ask a question?” asked Ameerah.

“Yep. Ask away.”

“Well, two questions, actually. The first is 'how do you keep bad people from learning this?’”

“Simple,” said Muriel. “They don't survive the connection. What's the second question?”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Two reasons. One is general, and the other is specific,” Muriel said. “In general? To get the training out to the majority of the population. Once people learn to use the balance to guide their decisions a LOT of bad things would end. The second is more specific to you. Without a little guidance to get you through it, you could easily go insane, or even get yourself into a situation where you'd really die. I prefer not to have that on my conscience, if I can help it. However, there's one thing we need to do before anything. We need to get you in touch with your balance. Otherwise, we can't complete your training.”

“Why?” asked Ameerah.

“You're feeling guilty about things you've done. I think there may have been good reason for what you did, but the only way to find out WITHOUT going through the judgment is to go through a process now, where you can do something about it. So, we'll go through it manually, so you can see how the decision was made. It does involve one other thing, a deeper connection to your soul. You're connected, now, and KNOW you're connected. But deeper is where the balance lies, where you can see for yourself whether it something to feel guilty about. Trust me, I've been through this a couple of times until I learned to watch the balance. It's not going to be easy for you – it means admitting to someone else that you did things – but it will clear up a lot for you.”

“Look,” Muriel changed the subject, “you're stressed right now. I don't blame you, but you're not going to work well that way. Let's get your shields up and tight, then have some lunch and relax a bit. OK?”

Chapter 22

Realization

(Thursday afternoon)

Ameera was laughing. Muriel had just told her about the antics of Taylor in his first parade for his grandmother. And the image she painted was so ludicrous that it had Ameera in fits. Muriel had also told her about the boy hearing voices in his head, and wondering if he was going insane, and how she'd put him under shields until she could get him out of the crowd and actually train him, which had Ameera understanding why Muriel was concerned.

Mata had joined them for lunch, and related some of the things that Muriel had done during training, including the episode where she was shot by her own squad. Then showing Ameera how that had given Muriel the confidence to face the bullies in school, and how she'd defeated them with pure defense. And all this while sitting in a restaurant eating a light lunch.

"Feeling better now, Ameera?" asked Muriel.

"Yea, I think so. Can I ask . . . do all the main Ambassadors to a country do such outlandish things?"

"No, not all of them," Muriel said. "Many use outlandishness in other ways. Taylor was a cocky kid. And Anna had the brashness of youth. Chen, on the other hand, is extremely dignified. Even her entrance into Beijing was dignified. Outlandish, but dignified. She walked into the city from ABOVE the city, to the accompaniment of Chinese gongs and thunder and lightning. All of them have some way of standing out, so they can be spotted easily. Whether it's the way they dress or the way they present themselves to others. Everybody's different, and everybody comes from distinct cultures. But all of them have caught the trick of making what they do seem like a show. Part of operating at that level – where you're interacting with the head of a country – is putting on a show that's so different from the norm that you're remembered for the show, and not for the seriousness behind it."

"I feel guilty about you paying for my lunch," Ameera said. "I don't like being obligated to somebody."

"Ah, young lady," said the restaurant manager coming over, "you are not obligated to anyone. In your country you have guest rights, yes?"

"Yes. Well, we're supposed to," Ameera said. "But it seems to be falling away, some."

"Well, here, guest rights are just that. You are our guest. Not just the guest of Muriel but the guest of all of Enclave. It is our privilege to host you in a way that does you honor. And on top of that, you are a trainee, and therefore it is the responsibility of all of Enclave to help train you," he said. "You earn this just by being in training and being our guest."

"Oh. I never thought of that. Well, Muriel, you were absolutely right. The soup helped calm me down without being heavy. I'm beginning to feel like I can face the world, now."

"Good," Muriel said. "Shall we go back to my office, then?"

"Yes. I'm not looking forward to this," Ameera said. "But if it has to be done, then I suppose we should get it out of the way."

"It won't hurt, Ameera," said Muriel. "It may be embarrassing, but that would be the worst. And you're among friends that DO understand." And she translated the three back to her office.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to that," Ameera said.

"Sure you will," Muriel said. "You should have seen my friends when my squads and I taught them how to translate. It looked like the inside of a popcorn machine, in here. Twelve twelve year old kids popping in and out, all over Enclave, with all the enthusiasm of kids."

Ameera snickered. "Do you ever hear from them?"

"Who? The kids? Their office is right over their. Some of them have picked professions to follow, and are already active in them," Muriel said. "Others are still looking, which is fine. They're still young. OK, here's how it's going to work. I want you to sit and relax. And that means your mind, too. Your soul is part of you, not something separate. So, let it come up and join you. It won't take over. It can't. The human personality is dominant. What it WILL give you is a lot of experiences. You'll understand when it happens. There's no reason to be afraid of it. Just let it flow through you for now. Later on, you'll find you can draw on those experiences."

Ameera closed her eyes and just sat quietly for a few minutes. Then suddenly her eyes opened wide. "OH! It's like a warm blanket wrapped around me."

"Nice image," Muriel said. "I can see why you felt that way. It is something like that, or loving arms gently hugging you."

"Yes! But, at the same time, it's ME!"

"It's always been there, and always had an effect on you. Now, in that experience there is something that's hard to describe. Some people see it as a meter, where the center portion is 'normal' and the ends are 'good' or 'bad'. Others see it like a beam balance type scale. Still others don't see it, but feel it, like they're off balance one way or another," Muriel said. "That's what we're looking for, is something that indicates balance to you. But we're looking for it by NOT looking for it. Just letting it find you."

"Hmm. OK, so I try to make my mind blank and call to my balance . . . OH! I think I've found it. Like a line of light from white to black, and in the middle is a line that kind of fluctuates back and forth, slightly, where it's gray," Ameera said.

"Now that's interesting. Nice image. And here's the trick. You can call your balance any time, and pass a decision to it to evaluate. And it can be ANY decision, past, present, or future. Future ones you have to be careful of. Situations can change, and a generalized future decision that goes toward black can change to going toward white because of that. Oh, and vice versa, of course," Muriel said. "What it's measuring is the amount of pain you are causing others compared to the amount of pain you or those you care about would receive. And what we're going to do is pass your past decisions that you feel guilty about past the balance and see what IT says about them."

"OK, NOW I see why you said it could be embarrassing. To do it right," Ameera said, "I have to be honest with myself. I can't try to rationalize away what I did."

"Yes, and this can cause you some pain. Putting you through this could go against me, except that the reason I'm doing it is to keep you from having to do it on Judgment Square. Here, you've got a chance to change things by apologizing to people, or making some sort of restitution, or something. Judgment Square would trigger the same thing in you, but without that feeling that you could change things," Muriel said. "It can really clobber people. Especially if they go there on a one-way trip. There's another up side to this, too. Once you've done this self-judgment, you don't go through the same things again unless they're unresolved."

"OH! So, if I judge myself, now, and do it honestly then the things I've resolved won't be held against me later."

"Exactly. Now you see why I can get away with putting you through something like this and not have it count against me," Muriel said. "I, or whoever you want to use as a sounding board or helper, can help you understand when you're not being completely honest with yourself. It's probably the closest to religion or psychology that the training ever gets. And that's the other thing. I'm human. I have my own set of values, and they may not line up with yours. I can try to be non-judgmental, but I might fail. So, you can have an Envoy work with you – talk you through it. There are several around that can do this, including one of the best just a few short steps away. He's had a lot of experience doing this, and taught me how. And that's the catch, The Envoy is a 'he' in the way he looks and, to a certain degree, in the way he behaves. And that might have a negative effect on you. So, I want you to think carefully about your choice. Oh, and I've got a couple of friends that can do this pretty well, too. One's a doctor, a girl. The other's a guy, but probably the least threatening guy you'll ever meet."

"Ameera," Mata said, "what you may not realize because Muriel bungled the description," and Muriel stuck her tongue out at her security chief, and Mata did the same, and they laughed, "is that for the most part Envoys are non-judgmental. SOME of us have been corrupted by that little monster sitting across from you. Like me. But we can get one in fresh from Home that is absolutely non-judgmental to talk you through this. Muriel isn't making this offer in the hopes that she won't have to do it. She's making the offer so that you will feel comfortable with who works with you. And, it's not a snap decision. You can take your time, meet people and Envoys, stay here and learn other things for as long as it's necessary for you to come to a decision. You need to be comfortable with who works with you so that you

don't feel that they are judging you.”

“And what Mata didn't tell you, because she bungled it,” said a deep male voice, and Mata and Muriel laughed again. “is that there IS one human that can be that non-judgmental. I know because I trained him to replace me as the one to greet the souls of the dead as they arrived on Judgment Square. Hi, Ameera. I'm Caleb. That human is no longer alive. He's an ex-Marine that was killed in battle, and just happens to be the father of another ex-Marine that's highly placed in the government of America. However, now that you know that the soul comes from an Envoy, and that Envoys can appear human – even to touch them – you can see how I can get him back here for this. And when you DO make your trip to Home, that's who will greet you and try to help you past the bumps. And congratulate you on your achievements.”

Ameera had shrunk into herself as Caleb came into Muriel's office, and had begun to look very scared. Finally, as Caleb stopped talking, she said, “You were the angel of death?”

And Caleb laughed. “No,” he said, “there never really was one. That was something that humans came up with. No, I simply greeted the people, tried to comfort them and find friends and relatives to meet them. Or even help them go through the judgment and offer suggestions as to why they made certain decisions or why they felt guilty about them. In short, cushion them some from the worst of it. They still judged themselves, but sometimes they didn't pay attention to circumstances surrounding the decision, and made it harder on themselves than it needed to be. Then, I was offered the opportunity to do it with people before they made a one-way trip. And what had started to become depressing for me suddenly became a joy. And I've taught that method to a number of others, here. Another Envoy, for one, plus more of Muriel's friends than she may realize. Doctor Fran, who is a medical doctor. Bobby, who is a counselor. Tommy the philosopher and Don the teacher, as well as a couple of others that don't have professions yet.”

“Caleb,” Muriel said, “this isn't a job interview.” And he laughed his easy laugh.

“You're right,” he said. “It WAS beginning to sound like that, wasn't it. I'm sorry, Ameera. I will add this, though. Muriel was my first student in this skill. And I taught her because she'd gotten herself into a mess that she couldn't get herself out of. But by understanding the training, she was able to bring herself out of it. And, in a way, she may be better at this than I am, because she understands it from the human point of view as well as the Envoy point of view. So, think about who you'd like to work with – who you'd be comfortable with.”

Ameera looked at Muriel and Caleb. Then looked out at Mata, sitting at her desk, where she'd gone back to work looking over reports. “This is going to sound weird, but I think I'd like Mata to help me.”

“Any particular reason why?” asked Muriel.

“Yes. When she was talking about some of the things you went through it was like, I don't know . . . I guess because she sounded like she was concerned and cared about you.

Like she understood what you'd gone through," she said. "Not in a judgmental sense, but in a compassionate way."

"That's as good a reason as any. Mata?" asked Muriel.

"I'd be honored to help. And a bit flabbergasted. I told you that I'd been corrupted by Muriel. I have some human emotions. Something that most Envoys don't have. And I make mistakes, sometimes. Caleb, I'll ask you for an update on that course, though. I want to do this right. And where can we do this?" Mata asked.

"My apartment, if you like. Or right here. I'll leave and you can wall it off," Muriel said. Caleb smiled in a gentle way.

"Your apartment, I think. If you don't mind," Mata said.

"I wouldn't have offered it if I minded, Mata. You know where everything is, and you can always create what you don't have or can't find." Mata just nodded, smiled at Muriel, and translated Ameera up to Muriel's apartment.

Caleb kept Muriel company for the four hours it took before Mata brought her back down to the office, both of them giggling like teenagers. The first thing that Muriel noticed was that Ameera had stripes. Five of them.

"OK, you two. What have you been up to, and how much do I have to clean up?" Muriel asked.

"Nothing mother," they both chorused. And giggled.

"Hmm. I can see I'm not going to get anything intelligent out of the two of you. Mata, did you at least get the poor woman a room?"

"Yes. She's all set. It was easier than either of us thought. The only thing she'd felt guilty about was the men she sent to Home. And she DID send them there. It was confirmed by Zeb Carter. They came. They saw. They suicided. And yes, it was her soul that did it, in a purely defensive action," Mata said. "They were armed, and they'd intended to do more than just cut her. You're too young to know the details." And she giggled again! "Anyway, once I found out WHY she felt guilty, it was easy. So I ran her through the rest. I'm afraid her father is going to be very upset with her. I corrupted her. You should SEE some of the clothes she chose."

"Caleb," Muriel said, "you see what I have to put up with? An Envoy that thinks she's a teenage girl. HOW am I supposed to get any work done when she's like this?"

"Well, you could always call it a day, and take us all to dinner," he replied with a grin.

"Humph. You're as bad as they are," Muriel replied. "But, I suppose if I must, I must. Ameera, how are you feeling?"

"Fine," she replied. "Free! I've been feeling guilty about the wrong things all this time. But my father is NOT going to understand. And I'm not going back to the way I was. I refuse. He can disown me if he likes. I have some money of my own, and can find work. I'll be fine."

"You may not have to find work. It may find you. We need to talk. But, that's for later. First is dinner, and your adventures. And WHY my security chief is acting like a teenager," Muriel said.

"Muriel, it's because I understand. I never really taught anyone, alone, before," Mata said.

"You taught me."

"No, not really," Mata said. "I'd tell you what we were going to do, and you always just went ahead and did it. Then you turned around and taught your friends. Oh, I've helped. But it's NOTHING like doing it from the beginning. It creates a bond. YOU know it. That's why you're happiest when you're training someone. And now I know, too. Let's go to dinner. I'm famished."

Chapter 23

'The Bull on the Roof'

(Friday morning)

"Here's a question for you, Ameera. A French composer, Darius Milhaud, wrote a piece of music based on Brazilian popular music. He named it 'Le boeuf sur le toit', which has been variously translated 'The Bull on the Roof', or 'The Ox on the Roof'. What was the bull doing up there?" Muriel asked.

"You've got to be kidding? Do people actually think about such things?" asked Ameera.

"Well, I'm a people, and I just asked."

"Well, it's ridiculous! It's meaningless. In the first place, how would it get up there? Nope. I'm not playing that game."

"OK, would it help if I told you that there was a bar named after that ballet, and it's alternate name was the Nothing-Doing bar?" asked Muriel. "And that there's an American phrase, 'nothing doing', which loosely means 'I'm not having any of it', or 'I'm not going there'. Basically a negative of whatever the responder has been asked. Hi, Tommy."

"No, it doesn't help at all. And it's too early in the morning to even try to decipher the indecipherable," Ameera responded.

"Don't stay up so late at night. Believe it or not, I do have a serious reason for the questions."

"Muriel, I could hear the mental gears grind down to dust way over in my office. I'm not sure I'd care to tackle that question, and I'm better equipped to unscrew the inscrutable," Tommy said. "Why are you torturing this poor woman."

For answer, Muriel simply said, "Le boeuf sur le toit."

"Oh, bull, Muriel. We've played that game before. The best answer I've heard was from a drunk that Bob locked up, one night. And I wouldn't even begin to quote it. It was a long, rambling diatribe on the world in general, and any bull that was stupid enough to become steak and hamburger by falling off the roof," Tommy said. "And as for the name of the bar, well, there certainly was nothing doing there. The ballet was just as much a rambling diatribe as the drunk's long winded words."

Ameera took another sip of her coffee, then said, "Doing nothing. Turn it around, and it DOES make sense. The bull was doing nothing. So, there was nothing doing."

"And?" asked Muriel.

"And, it was being outrageous while doing it," said Ameera.

"Hmm. Muriel, I think I'm about to turn in my diploma in philosophy. I think I see where you're going, and it's scary," Tommy said. "You're just a girl. You aren't supposed to think like that. And Ameera's worse. She turned it around so it WOULD make some sense."

"Just a minute! I'll have you know that women can be VERY intelligent. There's no such thing as 'just a girl'," Ameera said with some heat. "Besides, my professor kept hammering at us that if you can't solve a problem, solve the parts you can. And sometimes you have to turn it around to see it from a different point of view!" Muriel just sat back and smiled. "And, in this case, the problem was just a lot of bull."

Tommy clapped, slowly. "Well said. And you're right. Now, what do you do with a problem that's just a lot of bull?" he asked.

"Oh, gad. You're as bad as she is."

"Where do you think I learned it from?" Tommy responded. "So, what do you do with a problem that's just a lot of bull? Give me two good answers."

"OK. Drive it off the roof and make hamburger, or lead it off the roof to someplace where it can graze in peace! There, happy now?" Ameera angrily asked.

"Actually? Yes," Tommy said. "There is a third answer, which is to do nothing and let the bull figure it out for himself."

"Thanks, Tommy. I wasn't sure she'd get it," Muriel said.

"Oh, I think she has. And I think she knows how it applies, now. Can I continue to sit in?" he asked.

"Feel free. I was never that good at philosophy. Too many bubbles and too little content," Muriel said.

"Well, I will admit that the way it's presented in American schools is just a lot of hot air. People looking for answers when they don't even know the questions, and playing with words to the point where they have no real meaning. Even the ancient Greeks never understood that the purpose of philosophy was to apply answers to real problems," Tommy said. "That's what clued me into the fact that they were getting the wrong answers. Pythagoras, for example. The theorem he created was just a mind game to him. Now, we use it as a trigonometric solution to right triangles. But it took some bright person to apply the answer that was just a game to him."

"So, you're a philosopher?" Ameera asked.

"Well, sort of. But most of what I do is try to be the bright boy that throws out the bull," he quipped back.

"And now you're going to make me think, more."

"Of course," Muriel said. "Seriously, I did you a disservice. I pulled you out of an unstable situation while you were in an unstable condition. Now, what do I do with you? Oh, we can give you the course or courses for the degree that you were working toward. That's not a problem."

"No," Ameera said. "the problem is that if I go back, even if I do nothing, just the fact that I've had the Envoy training will put everyone against me. I can try to lead them, but they won't follow because I'm just a woman. I can try to drive them, but then all there'll be is a load of hamburger. Or I can try to ignore them and hope they figure it out for themselves. But they won't."

"How do we turn the problem around?" asked Tommy. "You know, I've studied a bunch of religions. Most of them are full of nice words to comfort people, or to try to teach them moral behavior. But as a form of government, they're useless. And, at their worst, they're static. And a society that doesn't change will eventually die. Sometimes violently."

"Well, ours sure did," Ameera said. "One stupid move by the leaders, and suddenly we were without leaders and without law."

"Yep. Like that quote from Shakespeare, 'a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'," Tommy said. "Oh, no! It's happened. You've finally corrupted me completely, Muriel. Now I'M quoting Shakespeare!" Muriel laughed.

"Muriel, I see what the balance is, now. It's the law. It could be boiled down to 'do what you want as long as you don't do any harm'. But even that is wrong, because sometimes you have to do harm to some to do good to the majority. Or for the majority," Ameera said.

"Now, you know why we never made a push to try to get into any of the Islamic countries. They wouldn't accept us. And even though we've cut the head off the snake," Muriel said, "it's like a hydra. It has a lot more heads where that came from. And all of them male. They won't listen to a woman. Women are just to produce more kids or die trying. They are absolutely under the control of the men."

"And this is the problem you actually wanted me to tackle. How to change the society. Here you are, brighter than I am and more experienced in society and politics, and you're asking ME to come up with an answer?" Ameera exclaimed.

"Not necessarily come up with the answer, yourself. Though that would be best. But at least clue us in. You know your society better than we do," Muriel said. "And we really need to get that load of bull off the roof."

Ameera snorted. "You got that right. The men have all the control and can do no

wrong. But the women can have wrong done to them and be BLAMED for it. Put to death because they were raped, and the men call it adultery.” She snorted again, in disgust. “And the women go along with it, because that’s the way it is. It’s too bad we can’t just train all the women, so they’d see that they don’t have to be that way. Then they’d be protected against the men, and could push for at least equality.” Muriel held her breath.

“It wouldn’t work though,” Ameera continued. “Most of the women, the older ones, anyway, would refuse to take the training. Even a lot of the younger ones have been so brainwashed that they wouldn’t stand up for themselves long enough to accept the training. And if the men ever caught on to what we were doing, they’d kill us.”

“How?”

“They’d just round us up and . . . wait a minute! How can they force a trained person to let them kill them? But it would have to start with the young women in college, where it might not be noticed right away. Too young, and they’d be under the eye of a father, brother, or some other male. Older, and they’d be forced to marry, and again under the eye of a husband, father, brother or other male. But in college, in the dorms . . .” Ameera’s talking petered out as she thought. “About the only real jobs open to women is teaching other girls and women how to read and do sufficient math to handle the household. And the Qur’an, of course. TEACHING! I’m in the wrong profession! Get a teaching position, get the girls through breakthrough and shielded, and they couldn’t be harmed unless they WANTED to be harmed. There are even some young men that could be trained. Not many, but some who see the way society is run and object, quietly. It could work! Turn it on it’s head, and the bull would no longer be on the roof! I’ve got to go back! And you, Muriel, are a nasty, nasty woman!”

Muriel let out a sigh, then laughed. “Yes. I am. But the answer HAD to come from you.”

“And you, Thomas the Doubter. No wonder you went into philosophy! Doubter indeed. You are definitely as bad as Muriel.”

“Like I said, Ameera. Look who taught me,” he replied, grinning. “Oh, and those with the training can train others. Even the married women can’t be locked up ALL the time. There must be coffee klaches sometimes.”

“There are. About the only time married women can get together and talk,” Ameera said. “Yes. It might work. I’ve definitely got to go back.”

“You will. With answers. With training. And with the courses you need to be able to teach others, sometimes simply by asking ridiculous, outrageous questions,” Muriel said. “And you won’t go back alone. You’ll have Envoys with you to help. And to prove that this new way works. Now, look at your passport.”

Ameera did. She noticed the ‘Diplomat’ on the top of the cover, first. Then looked inside and saw the certificate saying she was an Ambassador to the People of Iran. And she

teared up.

"Is this real?" she asked.

"Yep. Unless you don't want to be the Ambassador. You don't HAVE to be," Muriel said. "But you're the first from your country to be trained, and you've figured out a way to get a foothold in the country. You're a citizen of that country, and have seen the abuses of power first hand. With the training we'll give you, and the support we'll give you, that makes you the most eligible person for the position."

"Ameera," Tommy said, "like the Envoys, we're protectors, first. So you may not want to be an Ambassador. We kids, Muriel's friends, really didn't have a choice. You do. But you need to know that sometimes it means making a target of yourself. We've even had to protect one of our own, and she ended up doing most of it herself. A lot of it is long hours and hard work."

"Are you trying to tell me not to do it?" Ameera asked.

"Nope. I'm trying to let you know that there's a lot to it, and not all of it is pleasant. Some of it can be downright nasty. There can be lots of disappointments. And some of it is very tedious. So, if you're thinking that the position is going to make people think of you as someone important . . . well, it just doesn't happen. You have to make it happen," Tommy said.

"That's why we give you squads to help you. Sometimes things have to be done with brute force. Other times, it seems like you have to be in more than one place at a time. And that's also why you can call on us any time you need help. Either we'll supply it or Home will, but a call for help will ALWAYS be answered," Muriel said.

"This will take time," Ameera said. "And where would I put the squads?"

"Until we could get you set up with some sort of office, they could spend their off time in Home," Muriel said. "They don't have to eat, they don't sleep – at most, they just use down time to let information percolate through their minds – so they don't need 'homes' in the usual sense of the word. They take changing time zones better than we do, which isn't saying much. A ROCK can take changing time zones better than we can."

"Yes," Tommy butted in, "but a rock has no mind, so it doesn't mind." Muriel just covered her eyes with her hand and shook her head slowly.

"Never mind, Ameera. You don't want this job. You might end up with what I've got – endless bad puns from those that are supposed to be my friends," Muriel continued, reversing herself.

Ameera, who was valiantly trying to keep from giggling by holding her mouth with both hands, finally succumbed to the mirth bubbling up in her. She laughed. She crossed her arms over her stomach, bent forward and laughed. Finally, she came up for air and said,

“There really wasn't any question of my going back and trying to make the changes. I have to. I have the abilities, now. And I can't leave my friends in that endless loop of abuse. I have to try to help.”

“And we'll help you. I think first . . . Betty? One Ambassador course to go, plus a side order of whatever she was studying in college. Oh, and can we get the teacher course, too, and did we ever get it certified through the government?” Muriel asked.

“You sound like your ordering fast food,” Mata said.

“One loaded Ambassador with everything on it,” replied Betty, and that set Ameera giggling, again. “Hi, Ameera. As you may know, Muriel is the Chancellor of the University of Home. I'm one fifth of the academic staff of the University, and the head of that staff. Isn't that impressive?” she said, grinning. “Now, I'm going to dump a whole load on you. OH! You're deeply connected. Good. Just let it pass through you to your soul and it'll open up so you can use it right away. Then, maybe you can teach Muriel a thing or two. Goodness knows, I'VE tried.” Ameera giggled again.

“Now, what you might not know,” Betty said, as she began the dump, “is that when Muriel first came here she had four squads assigned to her. It was decided, to keep her parents in the dark, that two of the squads would be children. Oh, not really children, but would look like it. Mata included. The other two would be adults. And all of them would be mixed gender. One of the adult squads acted as very nervous guides for her parents, showing them all over Enclave. The other squad – mine – were to be her teachers, and get her up to speed on her course work, and three years ahead. We were supposed to be teachers, not trainers. All of the University of Home came from that humble beginning.”

“We did the same with her friends, when she brought them out,” she went on. “Then our cagey little monster decided that wasn't good enough. She wanted her and her friends to all have college degrees. And she wanted ME to figure out how to parallel human teaching with Envoy teaching. Impossible. Except that it wasn't. There were only a few areas where we HAD to stick to Envoy style techniques. Medicine was one of them. Engineering was another. Well, a couple of months later, Ted named her Chancellor of the University of Home. That didn't mean that she KNEW anything. Just that she got to tell us what to do without knowing anything about it herself. You know, typical upper management.” By now, Ameera was laughing outright, her eyes sparkling from mirth.

“And,” she drew the word out, “you're done. Now, can I ask you a couple of rather personal questions? Oh, Tommy can stay. They aren't that kind of personal.”

“Yes,” Ameera said. “I may not answer, but you can ask.”

“Are you religious, and if so, what branch of Islam.”

“I was. After going to Home, I'm not really anymore. And it was the Sunni branch. Why?”

“Because, if you like, I can give you all your religious works, and a search routine to allow you to back up things you say from those works,” Betty said. “It’s rather a nasty trick, since it would allow you to talk to clerics of your religion with confidence and authority that even the best of them may lack in areas.”

“Would it make a case for the equality of women?” Ameera asked.

“I don’t know,” Betty confessed. “I haven’t studied it. And that may not be a simple question. So the answer might be rather involved. But, like I said, I can give you the works and the search routine, and your own soul can dig the information out.”

“Then, I want it. If it isn’t too much trouble,” Ameera said, with determination. And she received the load without a problem. “So, what’s next?” she asked.

“Lunch, I think. Then we’ll see about what you need, what you want, and getting your squads set up for you and introduced to you,” Muriel said.

Chapter 24

The Bull, confronted (Friday afternoon)

"Please excuse me. I am Maahir, and I have been selected to be the Princess' security chief. There is trouble approaching the dorm. Men with cudgels and knives. The women . . . they need protection." He was tall, and wore a type of overcoat and cap. And was obviously Envoy.

"I am Ameera. What can we do?"

"With your permission, we will stop them. I suggest, for this action, that we be faceless. This would be more frightening to them. To you, of course, our faces would always be plain," he said. Ameera looked him over, then duplicated the style of his clothing.

"I know this is not appropriate for a woman. And my face will be plain to see," she said. "But I like your style, and we should be similar. I will be with you. These are my people."

"Mata!" said Muriel.

"On it," was her reply. "Squads one and four, battle dress uniforms. We're going hunting." Getting the image from Maahir, Ameera gathered the group, and they all translated to the front of the building.

::Ameera, link with me, please,:: Muriel sent. ::I'll have to teach you on the fly. Here's how to project your voice. And I suggest that you and your squads glow black. I'll have mine glow white, which should light up the area.:: And Muriel sent the woman how to turn on the glow.

Ameera grinned, though Muriel could only feel the grin and not see it. She modified the glow, slightly, so it looked like black fire. Muriel's simply radiated, and she and her squads raised up above Ameera's squads, for visibility.

Who comes to disturb the peace of this place? Ameera's mental and physical voice rang out over the campus. **Who dares face the faceless ones? Who would bring violence to innocent women?**

"Get out of our way, bitch," said the leader of the mob. "Or you'll get what they get."

Would you blacken your soul with wickedness, defying all that you are supposed to hold holy? Your actions and behavior will earn you no points in Paradise. Instead, the Judgment will take you, and you will die the death, Muriel growled out. Mentally, with the last statement, was the impression of sin so deep that it caused the soul to suicide.

As the man stepped forward, his club raised, a line of black fire formed on the ground in front of him. He paused, then started forward again. As his foot crossed the line of fire, he died, falling backward with a look of shock and horror on his face. And the crowd silenced. The line now grew in length, and surrounded the building.

Those of good will will not be burned. Those who wish to be violent will die. The choice is yours. Go tell your masters that I have said this. And tell them that if they send more of you, I will come for them, Ameera said.

::Muriel, I need to check inside with some people.::

::Of course. Give me an image. We'll join you.::

They came out in the reception area of the dorm first floor, and Ameera made an announcement over the PA system, requesting all the women to come to the reception area – suitably dressed. Then, they waited. Women straggled in in ones and twos. After a while it was obvious that no more would be coming and Ameera began.

“This building is protected,” she said. “You can go in and out, past the flames, without harm. But they can't get in. However, that doesn't protect you once you're past the flames. There is a way you can be protected. Accepting that way, though, means that you would have to accept that you are intelligent, thinking beings the equal or superior to the men. It means a couple of days of intensive training from a people you didn't even know existed because the government didn't want to acknowledge them. It means a lot of things, and a lot of changes. You know who I am.”

::Mata, about how many people do you think are here?::

::About a hundred and fifty,:: she replied.

::Would Guest House have room for that many?::

::They would if we warned them, now.::

::Warn them, Mata. And get some Envoys down here to make it look like the dorm is still occupied.::

“I've been away. I've learned. I've come back to teach what I learned. But it is not something that I can force on you. You have to be willing to learn,” Ameera continued, oblivious of the fast mental dialog between Muriel and Mata.

::Ameera,:: Muriel sent. ::We're taking them out of here. ALL of them. Those that don't want the training will simply be guests. Those that want the training, we'll help with.::

“We're going to take a trip,” Ameera went on, as if nothing had happened. “We're going to leave this country for a place where you can be protected, where you can have the opportunity to decide, without pressure, whether you want the training. And when you realize

the method of transportation, I think you will understand just how valuable the training is.”

::The manager said 'no sweat'. He'll put them on the Visitor's side. He just laughed and said that overflow works both ways. They won't be charged, and he's got Envoy women ready to care for them. I've got your other two squads to backstop them so they don't panic and run. Any time you're ready.::

Now, Muriel spoke. “My name is Muriel. I am the Leader of Home and the Ambassador to Earth. I welcome you to the Enclave in America,” she said, making the mass translation, “and to your temporary quarters. You will have rooms, servants, food, clothing, medical attention if you need it, and the opportunity to learn how we are able to do the things we do. You will not be kept here against your will, but I do suggest that you all go back together, for your own protection.”

From behind Muriel, female Envoys came out and went to the young women, introducing themselves and coaxing them into the building. The manager came over to Muriel and said, “With this influx, we're dispensing with our normal registration process. The Envoys know where to take the ladies, and will get names and pair them with room numbers for me. They look to be somewhat traumatized.”

“They are,” Muriel said. “They were in a dorm in Iran, and were constantly under siege from men. We stopped the latest assault on the dorm.”

“AH! Then I will let the Envoys know how to deal with them. Casually, warmly, comfortingly. I understand, now, why you wanted only female Envoys. They don't need to know that five minutes ago many of them appeared to be men,” he chuckled. “Will you be training all of them?”

“I don't know. We didn't give them a chance to make a decision there,” Muriel said. “I felt it was better to get them here, and let them learn about the Training, first. Ameera will be leading the training, if they will accept it. It'll help establish her as a leader. I have a different job to do. That mess in that country isn't getting any better. It's time to find out why, and put a stop to it.”

“Wouldn't it be better for Ameera to do that?”

“Maybe. But she doesn't have the experience. And the roving gangs of male hooligans that are building up again are endangering the whole country. And somehow I don't think that's accidental or coincidental. I think they're being led. I intend to find the leader and make an example of him,” Muriel replied. “There will be ways to demonstrate to the country that she is as powerful as I am. I'll make sure of that. She did a good job of demonstrating that, just a few minutes ago.”

Muriel and the manager watched the last of the students go past, then Muriel said, “I don't say this often enough, but what you do – you and your people – in calming down guests and making them feel welcome and sheltered goes a long way toward helping me do my job. Thank you.”

"It's our pleasure. Though I will pass that on to my people. They'll be glad to hear that it helps you," he replied. "This is nothing like setting up for the signing of Chen's acknowledgement of China as an Enclave. That was far more people under much more confused a time. And you thanked me for that, too."

"Of course. But these are the exceptional times. I should be thanking you more often for the ordinary times, when you manage to do the same thing. Visitors that come in and learn from you and your people. Some of whom come back for training because YOU'VE set it up in their minds. The work you do is really appreciated," she said, smiling. "And now, I've got a nasty job to do, so if you'll excuse me"

"Of course. And good luck," he said, and went back to the registration desk.

::Mata, I want all four squads. I'm putting a country under interdiction. This nonsense has to stop::

::You're getting the observers, too. Can your voice cover the country?::

::Watch me,:: she sent, grimly.

::But we don't even know who is causing this,:: Mata sent back.

::Yes we do. MEN! Men who have gotten their way for too long,:: Muriel sent back, and translated them to a spot above Tehran.

Here me! She said and sent, causing the very air throughout the country to vibrate with her voice. ***Here me, people of Iran. For too long, your men have abused your women physically, mentally, and spiritually. For too long you men have gotten away with crimes that, in any civilized country, would result in your imprisonment or death. It is over. The rule of men is ended. Harm a woman, you will end up in the hospital. Show disrespect to a woman, and you will find you face rubbed in the filth of dogs. Women are not the cause of your inability to control yourselves. Nor can you blame it on the heat in your country. It isn't the heat, it's the stupidity. Continue, and there will be a lot less men in this country. This country is under the interdiction of Home. Break the peace of Home, in any way, and you will be found and prosecuted. You have demonstrated that you are unable to police yourselves, therefore you will be policed by my people. Straighten out your laws and behavior, and I may let you go back to ruling yourselves. But there WILL be changes in your behavior, or you will find out what it's like to make a woman angry.*** And she translated back to Enclave.

::And now, we wait to see who screams,:: Muriel said, as she translated back to the street in front of the Guest House.

::But will they?::

::Yes. Someone thought to use the confusion in the country to establish a deeper

corruption and more abuse. That little demonstration that we just broke up was meant to show the immorality of college women – to stop education of women and bring them back under the fist of men.::

::How do you know this, Muriel?::

::Half the men had video cameras. Professional ones. Some of them had the station name and logo on the side,:: she replied. ::And the leader of the group was a news caster. He's famous enough that he's been on international television. They just got put on notice that there's a new sheriff in town.::

::WAIT A MINUTE! Are you trying to say that all the rioting, looting and stuff is staged?:: asked Mata.

::Nope. Not all of it. But someone is pulling the strings. And, I'd almost venture to bet that he always has been. That's the one I want. And I want him taken publicly, and the evidence against him to be so complete and dramatic that no country will be able to say that we acted improperly.::

::So, your little drama . . . ?::

::Ameera did well, but it was a small step, and I don't think he'd come out for that. We just threw down the gauntlet. We told him that all his immoral teaching has just ended. It'll take a little time for him to realize that we mean it – that we won't put up with the nonsense any longer. That the old way is dead, and he's lost power. And he won't like that, and will try to find a way to take it back,:: Muriel said. ::I'm betting that he'll try to use the media against us. So, I'm being nasty. I'm telling the Envoys to watch the media, too, and censor anything that goes on the air. I want them to deny him that ability. Worse, I want them to publish where they get any disinformation from.::

::They're not going to do that,:: Mata sent. ::They're going to publish what they're told to publish. And they're not going to give up sources willingly.::

::Mata, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting controls most, if not all, of the broadcasting in Iran, and about Iran internationally. I've got 'Faceless Ones' in the main offices and every outlet that they have. We WILL get the information. And the truth will be told. They don't have to like it, but the ones to appoint the head of the IRIB were the first to be lost in the upheaval. Programming stopped, pretty much, during the mess and they're just starting to get back to broadcasting news and such. And now, WE control them.::

::So, you're going to put out propaganda.::

::The worst type of propaganda, Mata. We're going to tell the people the truth. We're going to show them in their own holy books just where they were lied to. And we're going to rub their noses in the fact that they bought into it because it made them feel big and important. When the death threats start against me, then I'll go back in with a squad. ONE squad, Mata. You can come too, if you like. And we'll start picking up the little guys, the ones

that try to attack me, and rolling it up from there. Sooner or later, we'll find out who's trying to restart this brushfire. And when we do, we'll have an unbroken chain of evidence to hold against him. His execution will be public, as will all the evidence we gather.::

::What about the police?:: Mata asked.

::Good question. I could just disband them, but that would serve no useful purpose and would just put a lot of violent men out on the streets. Or, I could go talk to each of the commanders and get them to understand that the old ways have changed. However, I think that would undermine Ameera's authority as Ambassador. So, I'm going to suggest that she talk to them, and only call me in if she absolutely has to. Military? I think the same way, with one exception. I think that the missiles and the nuclear facilities that aren't just generating electricity should be eliminated, in front of the military commander, in such a way that it makes it obvious that we mean business.::

Ameera came back out, saying, "Well, they're settled, and chattering to each other like magpies. Muriel, I don't like wearing black when I'm trying to be friendly. Would there be any problem with my wearing white?"

"None that I can think of," Muriel said. "And you can always switch when you feel that what was supposed to be friendly has turned ugly on you. Oh, and there's something else that might help, either white or black," she said, grinning.

"Muriel!" Mata said. "You wouldn't! Think of the mess you'd make. And do you want everyone to know your secret?" Muriel just laughed.

"Mata, you old woman. I think by now enough people know OUR secret that it's no longer a secret. Ameera, if you really need to impress people and establish your authority, there is one other thing you can do." And Muriel grew about a foot and glowed, and wings appeared on her back, flexed, mantled, then folded and disappeared. Ameera was staring at her with wide eyes, and her mouth dropped open as Muriel resumed her normal height. "What did you THINK Envoys were, Ameera? Yes, that's a part of you. You've been to Home. You know."

"I never really thought of it. Things happened so fast, that I just took them as they came," the young woman said. "But yes, it explains a lot."

"Humans are, quite literally, the Children of Home. The combination of a physical body with an Envoy soul. It's just that a baby's mind can't hold all the information of an Envoy. It was meant to gradually open up over time, as the child's mind grew. But that part of it wasn't perfected until recently. Oh, some make the breakthrough anyway, or are close enough to it that it can be forced. But the Envoy soul is always ONLY in service of the human body and personality," Muriel said.

"The Envoy soul doesn't make humans more than human, no matter what it looks like," she went on. "Rather, the human experience makes the Envoy soul more than just Envoy. Envoys don't judge. They can't. Literally. They are under constraints as rigid as a computer

program. Humans have 'the knowledge of good and evil' – the balance. That's what the judgment is. It triggers the experiences of the human and compares it to the balance – did something cause harm, and why. Was it justified, or was it a form of aggression against others. We, who have gone through it, KNOW that, and can use it in our daily lives. That way, the judgment on Judgment Square becomes easy and almost unnoticed."

Muriel took a deep breath, then said, "I know things have been moving very fast for you. This is NOT the way to train someone. But it's been necessary. I think you know now, after how we saved these young ladies from the dorm, that you can trust your soul to help you. There are other things I can teach you. But, so can the Envoys you have. Tomorrow, you'll start training those that will accept the training. Don't bother trying to convince them. They've probably seen enough to know it can be helpful and useful. And the Envoy servants at Guest House are certainly talking to them about Envoys and training. Both your Envoys and the servants will help you with their training. After all, Envoys ARE the training. The Manager will probably tell you to use the large room behind the registration desk. That's what it's there for. And I'll be around – in and out, as I have a few things to keep track of – and when I'm here I'll be happy to help."

"You're turning me loose, aren't you?" said Ameera.

"Yes and no. GAD! I hate that term. But it so often applies. Anyway, yes, I'm leaving it to you to do the work – to BE the Ambassador. But no, you're not being turned entirely loose. There are other things that we will be doing in the coming days, and decisions to be made, and I'd like you involved in them," Muriel said. "Partly because it will show you more about what an Ambassador is, and partly because the things we need to decide are things that haven't come up before. And also, partly because I'd like to become your friend, and not just some authoritarian figure you answer to. But, for the training, you're in charge, and the Envoys will take your orders because that's the way it is. They know that you've just been trained, and that you may not know all the things you need to know. And they'll help. They'll make suggestions, and offer to do things for you. Your security chief, especially, just as Mata does for me, still. You're their guide and their strength. And they're your support and protection from yourself."

"OH! I never thought of it like that. I thought I'd have to spend years learning."

"You will, believe me. And sometimes learning by doing. So, go work out with your security chief just what it is that you want to do, tomorrow, and how it can be accomplished," Muriel said. "In the mean time, I'll be working on how to finally calm down the disaster that your country has become. And Monday, you and Maahir, Ted, Mata, Bart and I will sit down together and see what we come up with." And Muriel smiled at the slightly older woman, then turned and went to her office.

Chapter 25

There's No Curing Stupid (Monday morning)

It's very hard to break people of the habits of threats and bribes. Yet, that's what the 'Faceless Ones' had to try to do. Oh, not Ameera's squads, that were busy teaching young ladies to be warriors without their knowing it. But the ones that had been the observers over Iran had taken on the same aspect. And now, at least one was in each of the IRIB offices, making sure that what was being put out on radio and television was truth, and verifiable. And, to be honest, that scared the crap out of the Iranian reporters, editors and management.

The management of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting was used to getting notes and sometimes phone calls telling them how to report the news. They were NOT used to some faceless person handing them a disk and telling them that they were to use the videos on that disk and the text that went with it in the next broadcast. It just wasn't proper. It wasn't the videos, themselves, that were the problem. Questionable parts could simply be edited out. But the text! There was no way that they could put that on the air. Calling the men that had advanced on the dorm criminals and the operation staged for the purpose of propaganda – well, that just couldn't be done! Even if it WAS the truth. In Iran, truth was what the leaders said it was.

And that's when the manager made a major mistake. He handed the disk off to a reporter and told him to sanitize in accordance with the dictates that had been handed down, before. At that point, a figure in black and with no face took the disk and said, “No.”

“You were given instructions that it was to be reported as shown on this disk,” the Envoy said, in a voice that seemed to echo in the room. “This is the truth of the matter. To report otherwise would be a lie.”

“We can't put this on the air!” the manager said. “It goes against everything that we've been taught!”

“Then you were taught a lie. Look,” the Envoy said, commandeering a computer and inserting a disk. “Here is the complete record. There are two things I want you to pay particular attention to. The first is the leader of the group. The second is – well, you'll see for yourself.” And, as the record played out, it was obvious to the manager who the leader was. But what shamed him the most was the IRIB logo on the sides of the cameras.

“Your lead reporter is missing today, I see. That's because he's dead. And not just his body, but his soul. It died when he experienced the Judgment in Home. He suicided,” the Envoy said. “And as for the cameras, it's obvious that this was an attempt to create the news that somebody wanted. I want to know who that someone was. And this version that I handed you WILL go on the air. It is time for the lies to stop. You,” he said to the reporter, “you have time to rehearse this before the broadcast. Get on it.”

"You will kill us all," said the manager, as the reporter returned to his desk. "You have no idea who you're dealing with."

"I know that it is someone that very much wants to remain hidden. I want very much that he NOT remain hidden, but is made accountable for his crimes. You can tell me who that is," the Envoy said. "You have been a party to this criminal activity for so long that I cannot help you or protect you unless I know who has give you the orders. And so, you will die. And you will go to Home and be judged. And there, your sorrow will be so great for the things you have done that your soul will likely suicide. The young lady in black that you saw talking has been to Home and returned, alive. It was she that formed the ring of black fire that surrounds the dormitory."

"Who are you to judge me?" asked the manager.

"Who do you THINK the Envoys of Home are?" the Envoy replied, loudly enough that it drew attention. Which is what he wanted. And he switched to a white uniform that glowed, and wings appeared on his back, and flexed. "We are the Messengers of Home," he said, "and it is our job to try to straighten out this country."

And that is why, Monday morning Mountain Standard Time, or late afternoon Monday in Iran, a squad in gray uniforms picked up over a hundred people and translated them to the warehouse prison in the American Enclave. The same scenario had played out in various offices in Tehran and around the country, leading to that collection of 'conservatives'. Dissenters still existed in the country, but were diffuse and not organized. They were people that felt that it was their right to use either fear or greed to get what they wanted. The important part of the operation, though, was the broadcast that went out on Sunday.

Reporter's voice over image of men brandishing clubs and knives approaching the viewer: *"An incident on the campus of the University has shown the level of disrespect for women and lack of civilization prevalent in this country. Twenty men, armed with knives, clubs and video cameras approached the women's dormitory with intention of doing harm to the students housed there. Note that the cameras have the IRIB logo, and that the leader of the group was a reporter for this network. Their plan to create the news was foiled by a young lady backed up by about 20 people that appeared to have no faces. This young woman somehow created a line of black fire on the ground and warned the men not to cross. The leader tried, and died. Autopsy has shown no marks on his body or clothing, and cause of death has been listed as heart failure. And in other news . . ."*

"Well, Ted? Think that will stir up some interest?" asked Muriel, when she'd shown him the video.

"GEEZ! Muriel, you just slammed the country for being uncivilized and the national news network for creating the news to suit somebody's purposes!"

"Exactly," she replied. "No sense doing things by halves. We've established links between them and the 'Supreme Leader' and his advisors. Businesses, military and, of

course, banks were involved in the shaping of the national policy. They kept feeding the 'Supreme Leader's' ego with their version of 'back to the fundamentals of Islam'. Those fundamentals, in their view, being violence and conquest. And he obliged them by clamping down harder and harder on the population and throwing abuse all over the world."

"So, how does this help us?"

"Reeducation. We're telling the population that it was all a lie generated to make money for a few," she said. "This, by the way, is NOT going out to the world. Just to the country. Iran is still cut off from the world. 'And in other news', she said, and Ted laughed, "Ameera got all of the students to take the training. The reluctant ones got trained yesterday. Once they realized what the training gave people, the reluctance disappeared. They'll be going back to their homes and training friends and family after they're returned to their dorm."

"Are you planning to create another country Enclave?"

"I'd rather not," Muriel said. "But a lot depends on Ameera and what she faces when she gets back. China was different. The training of the people started as soon as the military stopped being a threat. That didn't happen in Iran. And I hate to establish a totalitarian regime there, which is what would happen if we have to clamp down on them until they learn to be civilized. We'll just have to see how to play it."

"OK," he shrugged. "I suppose we'll have to wait, then. However, we do have a few other pieces of information on our agenda for today. The good news. Apparently people in China, at least out near the borders, have relatives in Korea and Viet Nam. And they've been training them. It's just cells of people at this time, but it looks to be growing. And Tibet – now there's a success story. Chen pulled what troops were left there out – most had already deserted. So, she went to the Buddhist leaders and offered the training. At first they resisted, until she showed them how it didn't conflict with their philosophy/religion. Whole monasteries suddenly got trained. The previous government was thrown out, and there's a new one, now. It's not an Enclave, and not everyone in the country is trained. But the new leaders ARE trained, and they're getting help out to areas that need it. They have formally asked Chen for assistance, but NOT to join China Enclave. And I don't blame them."

"Now, the bad news," Ted said. "Banks."

"Oh, what now!" Muriel said. "Didn't they learn? Stock market manipulation, bad loans, especially on housing, and then trying to say that they didn't need regulation. I don't think I've seen a more disgusting group of people."

"Well, they just outdid themselves. We've caught two of them laundering money for the drug cartels and terrorists. Bart had one of my squad members physically take the information to Melanie. I got a glimpse of it before he left. Quite extensive. And they're screaming that they did nothing wrong," Ted said. "I think it's time for Congress to really clamp down on them."

"Any of our banks involved?"

"Nope. Or, if so, only peripherally, and without their knowledge. Funds DO transfer in and out of banks, after all. And they don't always have a nice little tag on them saying 'drug money'."

"OK, we'll stand by if Melanie needs us," Muriel said. "Can you handle it if she does need help? I feel bad dumping it on you."

"No problem. And I expected that I'd handle it. I'm better at business than you are. And you're far better at troubleshooting than I am. In fact, I think Bart's already setting up the organization for help, expecting that Melanie probably WILL ask," Ted said. "So, what are we going to do about Iran?"

"I'm waiting for Ameera, so we can discuss it. When she gets here, we should have Bart and Mata in on the discussion, too," Muriel said. "I DON'T want another China under these circumstances. Not enough people in the country are trained. But I also don't want it to go back to the way it was, threatening everybody. Even their own people. And even if we stick around for a while to maintain order, as soon as we leave it WILL go back to the way it was."

"There's no curing stupid," Ted said.

"There is, but it's permanent. And we'd be killing off everyone that stuck their head up and said, 'I'm better than everyone else'. We'd end up killing ninety percent of the population that way," Muriel replied.

"Never underestimate the power of a woman," Ameera said, walking into Muriel's casual area.

"You're telling a woman that?" Muriel asked with a laugh.

"Well, you're doing it. The students went back to the dorm. Under their own power, I might add. And they've already started in on their families. Mainly the wives and daughters, though some sons and fathers have taken the bait, too," she said. "And when you get right down to it, just about everybody is related to everybody in Iran. And when the girls get done with their relatives, they'll start on their friends. I suggest waiting. You've already pointed out that it's very hard to intimidate someone with an absolute defense – one that can even be used as an assault."

"True, but that could take years," Muriel said.

"Ever hear of exponential progression? It beats geometric progression all over the place. I train one hundred people. Each of them train one hundred people. Suddenly, you've got 10,000 people trained, and THEY are each training one hundred people. How long before all the women and some of the men are all trained?" Ameera asked. "We're talking about exponents, here, where each group is squaring itself with every iteration."

"You're talking about having a majority of the people trained in just a few days," said Ted. "Are you implying that THEY would keep the greedy and aggressive people under control?"

"Would you want to let someone intimidate you when there was no way that they could hurt you or yours?" asked Ameera.

"What about legal action?" Ted asked.

"What about it? The old government was destroyed. The new one is yet to be set up, because there's too many factions competing for top dog," Ameera said.

"You're saying that, with the old government gone, and more than half the population trained, that those trained people become the law," said Muriel.

"Yes. No government can exist without the will of the people. You told me that. And when the will of the people is that they should be left alone and not harassed by the government, there isn't a thing the government can do about it. Especially if those people can defend themselves," Ameera said.

"Son of a gun!" Ted said. "I was wrong. You CAN cure stupid." And Ameera and Muriel joined him in laughter.

"The sad part is that a lot of men are going to die. They can't take the training, and they ARE too stupid to realize that they've already been beaten," said Ameera. "If they tried to take the training, they'd die on Judgment Square."

"So, you're saying that we should just wait and see what happens?" asked Muriel.

"Yes. For the time being. Everything changes over time. I can't even make any plans on where to build an Enclave until we know that a majority of trained holds control of the country. It would just invite more attacks than we need right now," Ameera said. "Even if the progression only goes geometrically, it isn't going to take more than a couple of weeks before we have a majority. Can you wait that long?"

"Rather than have a bloodbath on my hands? Definitely," Muriel said. "I'll even hold off on these people we picked up. Once you have a majority, I'll hand them back over to you and whatever government is set up. Then YOU can decide what to do with them."

"I believe there is an old axiom that says something like, 'don't let them give you to the women'. I have a hunch," Ameera said, "that they'll feel the same way when you've sent them back. Women can be VERY vindictive."

"Yes," Muriel said, as a sad memory passed through her mind. "Yes, they can. In any case," she said, recovering her good humor, "we've got that straightened out for now, and without even resorting to Bart and Mata to help us."

"I heard that," Mata replied, "and don't think you'll get away with it." Muriel just snickered. "Seriously, Muriel, have you HEARD them?"

"No, why?"

"Because they're worse than that bunch of fundamentalists that we put down four years ago. YOU go listen to them. All you have to do is walk in, and they'll start in on you. According to them, ALL women are brainless, little more than animals, that need to be kept under strict control 'for their own good'. That we're promiscuous and have no control, which is obvious because of the way we incite men to assault us." Mata shook her head. "I haven't heard such a load of garbage in years, and here, it's a whole country that's obsessed with it. Well, sorry," she added. "I shouldn't have sounded off like that."

"I take it that you went to make sure they were settled in, properly," Muriel said. "Well, I think I'll just take a little walk, myself, and see to their care. It'll be kinda like walking into a dog pound, don't you think? And Mata, you KNOW what the last thing is that they do to a male dog in a dog pound before it's adopted, don't you? To make sure that fewer strays are generated for them to pick up?" Mata looked puzzled. Ameera just turned white and her eyes got wide with shock. "Oh, and it helps them gentle down, tremendously, too."

"What do you . . . , " Mata started, then finally finished, "oh,no! You wouldn't."

"Of course I would. Do you think I should give them the opportunity to change first? Make them realize that their generative ability would depend on their being able to control themselves in a civilized manner?" asked Muriel. "Some of them are relatively young, and may have new wives. The idea of no continuance of the family might settle them down."

"Mata," Muriel suddenly said seriously, "What we have here is a conundrum. We have people who believe they are good because they believe in god and do what their god says to do. But what they do is wrong and harmful to the point of being evil. And somehow, I've got to get it across to them that that is not the way to behave. Because, if I can't, there's going to be a lot of dead people. Maybe not in the country, but certainly when they reach Home. So, what do I do?"

"Ameera, I'm about to confess something that Muriel never believes. I don't know everything. What is the next time for prayer for Muslims?" Mata asked.

"Just after lunch would do. Why?" Ameera replied.

"Because I think I know how we can cut the Gordian knot. Muriel isn't going to like it. And you don't have to participate in this, since it would go against your religion," Mata said. "I'm going to suggest that we go in just before their time of prayer. And that we go as messengers."

"You're intending to tell them that they are not on the path, aren't you." Ameera made a statement of it.

“Yes,” said Mata. “But there's more to it than just that,” and she changed. “This is what I meant by 'going in as messengers'.” And what Ameera now saw was an indeterminate adult figure with an indeterminate number of wings. And the reason for not being able to determine more was because of the radiant glow. Not even the face was visible through that glow.

“You said I didn't have to go, because it would be against my religion. But, now that I know the truth, religion doesn't enter into it. But how could I go, anyway. Humans can't appear like that.”

“You forget. Your soul is Envoy – messenger. It knows how to do it. And you saw Muriel do it. Ask it to do so,” Mata said.

Ameera tried. And was shocked to discover that she was taller than she had been, and the glow filled the room. Muriel made a mirror for her, and she saw that she couldn't tell what sex she was, nor even see her face. And sometimes it looked like she had a pair of wings, and sometimes like she had too many to count.

Ameera returned to her normal state and simply said, “I'm in.”

Chapter 26

Judgment is Coming (Monday afternoon)

It took the rest of the morning to set up how they'd do it. Partly because Ameera called in Maahir and told him what they were doing. He grinned and assured her that her squads would be there with feathers on. So it all had to be done again to allow for the additional troops. Muriel also had to teach Ameera how to pull that trick of making it look like you were walking in from a distance. It was decided that the two sets of squads would go in first and line the sides of the room, and that Muriel and Ameera would come in last. They would also be larger than the squads, with Muriel larger than Ameera. And then, it all fell apart.

"Why are we doing this?" Ameera asked. "Are you trying to give them a chance?"

"Well, yes, of course," Muriel replied.

"It won't work. They cannot conceive of a world where men do not rule – where women are considered more than animals – where they don't have the right to amass fortunes and hold the real power in the country," Ameera said. "This goes back further than you understand, Muriel. In fact, the seeds of it were planted in the teachings of Mohamed, himself, because HE couldn't conceive of anything different. Oh, I'm not denying that he was a great man in his own way, and much of what he taught still has relevance. But he had been taught that men were in control by his parents and society, and that shows through in spots. And the Shia took that portion of it and made it theirs."

"Ameera, what are you saying?"

"Their judgment is coming, Muriel. Just as sure as death. They would die rather than change, then hit Judgment Square and discover they were wrong. And die again. They were taught by their parents and by society that this is the way to get on in the world, and that it's sanctioned by god. And they cannot change, even when faced with the awful truth that they were wrong. I've talked with Caleb, who knows the history of a lot of the religions through the results of their religious leaders behavior on Judgment Square, so this isn't just my opinion. They will die, and die again, forever lost."

"And is that true of the entire population?" asked Muriel.

"A large portion of it, yes. Oh, they'll be offered the opportunity to change. But most will reject it. Even many of the women firmly believe that it's the way it is, and the way it should be," she replied. "This exercise might help salve your conscience. You can say you tried. But the reality is that you can do nothing with them or for them."

"So, you're saying that the balance doesn't work?"

"Oh, it works, all right. More than you might realize. Did you know that each time a soul is lost a new one is created? There's a balance there, too. There will always be Envoys. You were more right than you knew about souls being intelligent power. It's a concentration of the amount of connections in that power. When it reaches a certain level, it becomes self-aware and intelligent, and subject to strict laws that it can't break, itself. And when a soul dies, those connections are lost, which makes room for another strand of power to gain more connections, and one of them tips over the balance point and becomes a new Envoy. Conservation of energy in a vast way, and one that seems to defy entropy. Actually, there's a lot more to it, but that's the basics."

"That" Muriel actually looked bewildered.

"Yes. It lends a whole new meaning to the nature-nurture argument of psychologists. And, in a way, it explains the difference between Envoy and human souls. Envoy souls lack the complexity of human ones. Well," said Ameera, with a sigh, "all that's beside the point. The real question is 'do you really want to go on with this? Or should you and I and our security chiefs just go over, after their prayers, and talk to the leaders? I doubt it would do any good, And it really doesn't answer the question of what do we do about the country.'"

"I get the feeling that you have a suggestion," Muriel said.

"I do. But I could be wrong. And I don't know the politics of it," Ameera said. "I also don't know but what it would cause even more bloodshed. So, I'd like to know what you've come up with as possibilities. Besides, this is all off the topic of whether we go ahead with this."

"I thought you'd already decided it was useless."

"That's MY opinion. That's not going to stop me from putting on the show, if it's what you want to do, or you feel there's a chance," Ameera replied.

"Why?"

"Why not. I COULD be wrong," Ameera said. "I'll admit to a very poor opinion of my fellow countrymen and women. And I'm here to learn, and I AM learning. And part of what I'm learning is how to be outrageous. Maahir showed me some of the things you've pulled off. And they're great. They make a joke of things that everyone else considers serious. You show that you're different – so different that the norms of society mean nothing to you. You are a law to yourself, and not subject to the attitudes of society. Even the uniforms you wear scream that you are you, and the rest of society can just TRY to keep up."

"Yes, well I've done a lot of things that were deadly serious, too," Muriel said. "Some I probably could have done in a different way."

"How? By not being confrontational? I don't think so. You had to confront the situations. And where you had to be serious, you threw everything you had at them. And where it was simply thumbing your nose at society, you did it by being outrageous and

ingenious. And it WORKED. Because, in both cases, you were just being you. Muriel, I'm still learning who I actually am. You BECAME you at a much earlier age by simply reacting to the situations as they came up. But me? I've got to undo all the cultural heritage that I grew up with and thought was the final answer. That's why I'm constantly looking at you and what you did, and looking at myself and seeing where the social conventions that I learned started taking over for my thinking."

"You're not trying to be another me, are you?" asked Muriel.

"No! Definitely not. For one thing it wouldn't be appropriate to my people. And it definitely wouldn't be appropriate for me," said Ameera. "This is a different kind of balance, but one that has to be balanced against the image that I want to project, as well as who I am down deep."

"OK, let's take this to my casual area. Bring Maahir," Muriel said. "I think I can short circuit this for you, if you'll allow it."

"OK," she said, as they took their seats. "But why 'if I'll allow it'?"

"Because it means allowing Maahir to be deeper into you than he is right now. Because he can help you find that point, and even guide you to a certain degree, in finding yourself," Muriel said.

"What about your confrontation with the beasts in your prison?"

"They can wait," Muriel said. "They're not going anywhere. Mata? I'd like you to join me, too, if you would."

"Now," she said, "Here's the deal. Maahir is an Envoy. That means that, no matter what he looks like, he has no gender, and couldn't care less about things that you feel are private. He's never had a body, so he's never had all that complex of feelings and emotions sloshing around in him, complicated by hormones and culture. You might think of him as being like a computer that can walk and talk, but only has a basic operating system. Oh, he's got a bunch of 'programs' but needs YOU to tell him what to do and when to do it. The more you let him into your mind, the more he can help you. He can anticipate what you need and have it ready for you. He can answer questions for you because he'll know what you're trying to do on a more basic level than speech can give. In fact, you can think of him as an 'it' rather than a 'he' and be closer to the truth."

"He doesn't even have to be a he," Mata chimed in. "He can be a she. For us, it's as easy as changing clothes. I know. I was a 'he' before Ted called me to come train this little monster. My name was Matthew. And I blew it. Well, I was a bit rushed. I came through the door as a twelve year old girl, to balance her, and said, "Hi, my name is Matt . . . uh. And this impossible girl went with it, I've been Mata ever since. And it's been a blast. The only reason that we suggested that Maahir be male was that it would lend you more authority to have what appeared to be a male as a security chief. But it doesn't have to be that way."

"You can even choose to have a different Envoy as your security chief," Maahir said. We're not in competition with each other, so finding the right fit for you is the most important thing to us. And anything you consider secret would stay secret. Or, if you prefer the term, private. What Muriel is suggesting is that I scan your personality, NOT your mind, then I can help you build on that in the direction you wish to go."

"You've seen how Muriel interacts with her squads," Mata jumped back in. "Most of that is because I'm so deep into her that I can see what she needs done, and see to it that it is. I'm her organizer because, let's face it, she isn't that good at organization. So, I deal with that part of it, and feed the information back to her. And her squads are the same way in a more limited way. Each of them is deeper into her mind than Maahir is in yours, right now. We're the ones that keep her straightened out when she needs it. And she does. She's young and still learning about life and about her job. So, we support her with our work and with being honest with her about things that she's done."

"I can tell you from my experience," Muriel said, "that it's like having a friend, one that won't judge you, in the back of your mind helping you sort the world out. And it's easy to do. Just open up to him. The more you open up, the deeper he can go, and the more he can help."

"Ameera," Maahir said, "I'm here to be a friend. Someone whose shoulder you can cry on, when needed. Some one to tease. Someone to help organize things so that the world doesn't all come at you at once. Someone that won't judge you, but will offer you opinions when you ask for them. Someone to reassure you, and help you feel confident in yourself – not because I'm a yes-man or anything like that, but because humans need to know when they have done well, and how to improve. I'll guide you in ways that YOU want to go, not in ways that I THINK you should go."

"Whoosh! OK, I've just been triple teamed. OK, how do I do this?" asked Ameera.

"You've already got a link to me. And you've been very careful to keep it to just 'talk'," Maahir said. "Instead, look inside me and see that I mean what I said. I can't lie to you. When you understand who and what I am, then you can relax. And the more you relax and let me in the better I can help you."

Ameera looked at her security chief for a moment, then seemed to relax some. The look went on for about five minutes, then they were both grinning and a conversation seemed to be going on. Finally, it stopped.

"OK, I'm sorry, Maahir, that I mistrusted you."

"No reason for you to trust me until you got to know me," he said. "Especially with your history regarding men. But now, you know that you've got a friend at your back."

"This is unreal!" Ameera said. "And you mean to tell me that it's like this for you?" she asked Muriel.

"Pretty much," Muriel said. "Oh, I'm more used to it, now. But yea, She's got my back and I've got hers. She's become more human over the years. Something that surprised all of us. But it's in a good way. And that happened exactly because Mata was deep in my mind, and began to understand what humans go through. So, for a while, I was actually her support and comfort. That may happen with you two, too. If so, don't worry about it. Just holler, and I'll show you what Mata and I did to ease the problem."

Muriel could almost catch a fast mental conversation between Maahir and Ameera, then they both laughed. "Muriel, we WILL go see your beasts. But not the way we thought. I want you to see what we're up against, and why I feel that helping them overcome their judgment difficulties would be impossible. I'm going to have to ask you to play a part, though."

"OK, what's the part?" Muriel asked, and Ameera stood up.

"I'm going to have to ask you to dress like this," she said, changing into a burqa. "We will follow Maahir in to the cell block, silently, and let him be accosted by the leader of this group. Then, well, let it play out. Somewhere in the course of it, I will be introduced as the Ambassador to Iran. And after that, you will be introduced as the Leader of Home. At those times, the ones named will change out of the burqa and become visible. Then you will see. They do not need to be the same color. They can be any color, to make it easier to distinguish who we are. I will be wearing black."

A slow smile crossed Muriel's face. "Sounds like fun," she said. "OK, I'll take blue."

"And I'll take red," Mata said, also smiling. "Let's go."

And so it played out. Maahir lead the procession of colorful ducklings into the cell block, and up to the one that held the leader. As soon as he got in sight, the man threw himself at the bars demanding to be let out, and saying that he was an important person. And Maahir, with proper subservience, declared that he couldn't do anything, himself, but would pass it on to the Ambassador from Home to the People of Iran.

"Well, get him. I've got to get out of here, immediately!"

"Ah! Well then, you're in luck. Ambassador, this gentleman would like to leave these accommodations," Maahir said, and Ameera removed the burqa.

"No," she said. "Not possible. First, he was a direct cause of the grief and problems brought on the people of Iran. And second, he was directly involved in the attempted rape and slaughter of innocent women in the women's dorm of the university. It was the Leader of Home that brought him in, and it would be the Leader," she said, picking up on Maahir's use of gender ambiguity, "that would have to make the decision. However, I can get ahold of the Leader's Chief of Staff, if that would help."

"Well, DO it, woman, and don't waste my time," the man said, clearly upset to have to deal with a woman at all.

"Very well. Mata, could you ask the Leader for a ruling on this?" asked Ameera, and Mata immediately lost the burqa she was wearing, displaying the gray uniform of the American Enclave and Embassy.

"Why, no problem at all. Great Leader of Home, your presence is requested by this unworthy one," Mata said. And Muriel removed her burqa.

"So that you understand that this is the world turned upside down, mister. I am Muriel, Leader of Home. And you will not be released until law and order are established in your poor country and they can take custody of you. You are nothing of importance anymore. Your position is dissolved, your contacts have been apprehended and jailed for their part in the assault on the woman's dorm and for other nefarious acts that you and they have committed. Ameera, I see what you mean about this man," Muriel said. "Absolutely no respect for women, and can't imagine them in a position of power. When the country is stabilized, you may take him and do what you will with him. Perhaps you would consider publicly neutering him and otherwise disgracing him before the people of Iran, so that they know that no such behavior will be tolerated again."

"Perhaps. I'll let the women of Iran decide that, Muriel. They may have other ideas in mind for the man that masterminded the subjugation of women. Or, they may simply send them to Home for judgment," Ameera said. "I doubt that any of them would survive that, since they strayed so far from the path."

"This is outrageous! Women do not hold positions of power! It is against the teachings!" he sputtered, backing away from the bars. Muriel gathered the other three, mentally, and they formed a semicircle at the front of the bars. Suddenly, all their clothing was white. They grew and radiated an almost blinding light, and wings appeared at their backs.

"You would doubt the messengers of Home," Muriel's quite voice seemed to echo in the space. "You have truly fallen from the path of righteousness, and deserve no mercy at your judgment. Your soul will be destroyed, and none will remember you."

"YOU! Woman! You have no right to judge me!"

"Actually, I do. Knowledge of good and evil," Muriel said. "It's built into humans. However, it will not be me that ultimately judges you. It will be you, yourself. And you will not be able to rationalize away your guilt, or hide from your shame. And you, yourself, will be the destroyer of your soul. I do not envy you your contemplation of that, as you await your death. You cannot escape your judgment. Your soul already knows, and weeps for you. But you have hardened your heart against it and do not listen to its warnings. And whether it is minutes or hours, weeks or years, eventually you WILL go to Home and your judgment. I would offer you hope, if I could. But you've already shown that you wouldn't accept it. And that's sad. Because I've helped others whose soul was black to regain their balance and atone for sins of the past." As the group turned to leave, they heard weeping in the background.

Chapter 27

When in Rome, Eat Pizza (Tuesday morning)

Ameera, Maahir and Muriel were all in her casual area, Muriel working on her second cup of coffee of the day, when Melanie walked in.

"Melanie! I was just thinking about you," Muriel said.

"Anything good?" the National Security Advisor asked.

"Naw. Just that you were a lazy lay-about feeding out of the public trough, and never did a lick of work."

"Ah! You were being honest, for a change. So, how's the world treating you?" Melanie asked.

"It isn't. I have to pay my own way," Muriel replied.

"Yea, right. You haven't paid for anything since you came here." Then Melanie turned to Ameera and said, "Don't believe a word she says. It's all lies, except when she's telling the truth. Hi, I'm Melanie Carter."

"Hello, Ms. Carter. I'm Ameera. Are you an Ambassador, too?"

"Too? Oh, I see. Yea, but I don't have an Enclave of my own. I'm kinda the liaison between Muriel and the government," Melanie said.

"So, what's up, Melanie. The banks?" asked Muriel.

"I wish. Nope. Worse. I think I've got a mole."

"Plastic surgery can correct that," Muriel said.

"Funny. No, not that type of mole. Information going through Homeland Security that is supposed to be secret is ending up in the news the next day. It's already endangered a couple of operations, and we've had to close down seven more," Melanie said. "And they're always prefaced with 'reliable sources say', or some such."

"Secretaries," said Muriel.

"Maybe, but there are others in the office that might have access to the documents."

"OK, what do you want me to do?" asked Muriel.

"Whatever you can," Melanie said, with resignation.

"OK, right off hand, I can think of four ways to handle this. I don't recommend the first, but it's an option."

"What's that?" asked Melanie.

"Outsource Homeland Security to us. School's out, so we've got a nice building that can be turned into offices. I staff them with Envoys, and turn them loose."

"Um"

"Yea, that's what I thought. It doesn't solve your problem with the mole or recover your operations. OK, the second is better, but it won't recover your operations, either. We shield Homeland Security, and when documents get transferred out, track back and grab the person."

"Maybe. Go on," said Melanie.

"The third recovers your operations, but doesn't find the mole. Outsource the operations to us, but let us do them our way," Muriel said.

"Muriel, I DO hope you won't take offense, but . . . well . . . I hope your fourth solution is better than the first three."

"Why should it be. Melanie, you've got a problem – obviously. You've got someone passing information to the media. As a result, you've got people screaming at you because you're not doing your job, or else you've got targets that are ready for you. Solve either part of the problem, and you've still got a problem. I think you have another problem, too. You've been told that you CAN'T use us to solve the problem. That we're a foreign national, and therefor a breach of security, or some such drivel. And I'd almost bet that this second problem is caused by someone in Congress. Someone that has managed to convince one of your other stalwart employees that it's in the best interest of the country to expose the excesses that are taking place in the name of Homeland Security. Who in Congress would gain by having these operations shut down? Who in Congress would gain by having Homeland Security shut down? In short, who's calling for your head?"

"I don't know. It's always a different person that stands up and takes potshots at us. And it isn't even people in the same party."

"Uh, huh. What about the media? Is it always the same media outfit that's exposing the operations?" asked Muriel.

"Um . . . no. It varies."

"OK, what's stopping you from arresting them for publishing classified material?"

"That would just make it look worse, like we were trying to hide something, and were pissed off because they published it. Plus, they'd scream 'freedom of speech and freedom of the press' if we tried something like that."

"OK, shut down Homeland Security. Transfer operations to FBI and CIA, and coordinate through Secret Service. Oh, and make sure that the media knows that you're shutting it down. Just don't tell them that you're transferring the operations to other agencies. Instead, tell the media that this is in response to a political maneuvering that has effectively made Homeland Security unable to perform its duties."

"Why do you say 'political maneuvering'?" Melanie asked.

"Because, it's someone in Congress that's out after your head. Someone wants you out of the National Security Advisor position, because you're too close to something. So, first they back you into a corner, then they start stabbing you in the back," Muriel said.

"Why Congress?"

"Oh, they're not the actual source of the problem. I'd bet it's someone that's interested in keeping the banks running just the way they are. And maybe more. The other operations were about drugs, weren't they. Is that who the banks were laundering money for?"

"As a matter of fact," Melanie said, "only some of it. Some of it was going to terrorist organizations."

"But the banks were the hub of it, weren't they. That money wouldn't move unless the banks moved it. Melanie, I'm going to tell you something that you're not going to like. Homeland Security needs to go away. You don't replace police officers with bureaucracy. Bureaucrats don't arrest people. They're supposed to be the guiding principal. But, so are you. What HS actually is is another layer between the real people doing a job and the President. But it's become a monster," Muriel said. "So, shut it down. Oh, I know that you can't actually shut it down, but you can make it ineffective. Let them trade paper back and forth between their desks. Let them work on 'studies' that go nowhere. Old stuff. Anything to keep the people employed but actually ineffective and unable to handle anything that is sensitive. Put it back where it belongs, in the hands of cops with authority."

"And when Congress finds out?"

"Don't tell them. Or, at least, not directly. Besides, knowing who's going to scream the loudest when their prize leak is plugged will be very informative," Muriel said. "If they demand information, then tell them that HS is unable to make effective decisions and analysis. That wouldn't be a lie. As it stands, it can't make effective decisions because it's being trumped by the media releasing information they shouldn't even have. And by giving them only old stuff to work on, they STILL wouldn't be able to make effective decisions because they wouldn't have the current information necessary to work with." And Melanie started laughing. Laughing so hard that she had to sit down.

"Muriel," she said when she finally recovered her composure, "you are a bad girl."

"I know," Muriel grinned back. "Isn't it wonderful? Now, about those operations"

"The banks . . . there may still be something we can do about them. I've already taken that investigation away from HS and given it to the FBI. But the drug operations are blown. We were already to interdict them, coming in, when the information including all our operational plans hit the media. Naturally, that changed the way the cartels moved stuff into the country. Same thing happened with a couple of terrorist activities. Now, we can't even find them."

"OK, look. How bad do you want to get that mole?" asked Muriel.

"Bad. As far as I'm concerned he's broken the official secrets act, and probably a bunch of other laws. Treason would be the least of the things I'd like to hang on him. Why?" asked Melanie.

"Because there may be a way to do it, but it would probably ruffle feathers up on the hill."

"Oh, I'd LOVE to ruffle the feathers of those finger licking chicken pluckers. What have you got in mind?"

"Oh, an all American group of sixteen year old cops, dedicated to truth, justice, and the American way the way it is supposed to be," Muriel said.

"You're talking about your friends," Melanie said.

"Some of them. There's about six that haven't picked careers, and one that looks like he'd like to get into something more active. I have a hunch that part of the reason is that they miss the action."

"OK, stop right there. Do you have any idea what it takes to be a Secret Service officer? There's criminal law, to begin with. Then there's all the procedures that we have to follow. And that doesn't even count the physical stuff that takes practice," Melanie said.

"Yep. I know," Muriel said. "Believe it or not, I looked into it for both Secret Service and FBI. We've got all the courses, and the kids are connected to their souls, deep. So, that covers that side of it. Practice – you DO know that a lot of that is habit, and habits can be learned, don't you?"

"You're kidding! You're talking about creating a course that would turn out cops in minutes?"

"Why not?" asked Muriel. "Even experience is a learned thing. It's just not taught in classes. Look, why don't we get Henry or Adam in on this discussion."

"You're serious!"

"Yea. Or at least seriously thinking about it," Muriel replied. "I don't even know if they'd go for it, yet. But there's no sense in asking them if the opportunity isn't there."

"Uniformed? Or not?" she asked

"Well," Muriel said with a grin, "I'd HOPE they'd wear something."

"Smart alec," Melanie said. "OK, honest answer, they'd have to go in as deputies and under supervision. And in the case of trained children, that means it would have to be somebody trained that supervised them. Now, call Henry and ask HIM what he thinks of it."

"OK." ::Henry, have you got a minute or ten?::

"Muriel, you so seldom ask that I'm intrigued," he said, coming in and sitting down next to Melanie. "And who have we got here?"

"Oh. Henry, meet Ameera. Our brand new Ambassador to Iran. Ameera, this is Henry. He's an FBI Special Agent, and one of the first FBI agents trained in Envoy techniques," Muriel said.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Ameera. Though, from your wide eyes, I'd say that you're getting more education than you ever thought you'd get. Relax. Muriel's like that. Looks like what you're getting right now is a crash course in what someone like her goes through on a regular basis," he said. "Now, what's this all about?"

"Simple. I'm trying to find professions for some of my friends. There's six of them that haven't selected any area to go into, and one that looks to want to change. I'm beginning to think that they miss the action they had at the beginning," Muriel said.

"So, you want to give them a shot a law enforcement, and Melanie's already read you the riot act on that. Yea," he said, "you don't have to tell me anything. I can see it in your face. OK, Melanie's probably already told you that they need criminal law and the procedures of whatever outfit they join up with. In the case of the FBI, a degree in accounting is also a plus. And yes, I know you can cram all that into them in minutes. There's also the physical side of it, including proficiency in firearms of various types. And experience, though a lot of that happens on the job, partnered with a good agent. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"Most of it. What about age limits?" she asked.

"We'll take kids right out of college . . . oh, now wait a minute! You're talking about my herding a passel of sixteen year olds? You've got to be kidding! Even if they DO have degrees, do you REALLY expect me to get this past my superiors?" Henry asked.

"I don't know. Do you think you could?" Muriel asked, sweetly. Melanie chuckled.

"Woman," he said to Muriel, "you've got to be the most exasperating, infuriating person I've ever known. You can't do it. They won't allow it!"

"OK, so what's the age limit? How old do they have to be?" she asked.

"Twenty three. And they're not going to relax that for you," he said.

"OK, that gives us a target age. What about you, Melanie?"

"Twenty one," Melanie finally admitted. "And I agree. The powers that be aren't going to relax it just because your friends can do super-fancy aerobatics over their heads. Any law enforcement agency in America that's at all intelligent and worth its commission is going to say the same thing. You have to be an adult to join up. And you have to be fit, and you have to know law and the agency procedures."

"Hey, Muriel," Bob Garcia said, popping his head inside, "some of your friends were wondering if they could go on rounds with my troops. I told them I'd have to talk to you."

"Your decision, Bob. You're the chief of police, here. I trust your judgment," Muriel said, and he popped back out.

"You set that up, didn't you?" Melanie accused. "Real life doesn't happen like that. Even a Fantasy author would gag trying to pull a stunt like that."

"Nope. Sorry, Melanie," Muriel said, grinning. "Every once in a while reality throws you a curve. Some people call it serendipity. Others call it 'shit happens'." And she started laughing. "To tell you the truth," she said between choked back chuckles, "I can't think of a better teacher for them. They'll learn Bob's philosophy of law enforcement as it applies to the real world, and be monitored and tutored by Envoys." Melanie just growled, and Henry laughed.

Chapter 28

Pizza to Go

(Tuesday morning, later)

"This is NOT solving my problems," Melanie said.

"Of course not," Muriel said. "I never said I'd solve all your problems. You've got the manpower to go in and shut down the banks and pull their records. You've got the ability to call on the Envoys of Home to back you up with it. Or, you've got the ability to come to me and say that you need information from the banks that only we can get, because we don't do it legally by the standards of America. We cheat," Muriel added, unnecessarily. "You've even got the right to ask US to go in and get the records for you. We've done such, before."

Ted came in and sat down just as Melanie said, "You know I can't just go in and get them. I have to have warrants, and that means 'just cause' in front of a judge. And it takes a Presidential order to ask you to interfere in any way. Any of those stunts would have the banks lawyers all over us before we cleared the building."

"Banks again, huh?" asked Ted. "Muriel, I came in here to ask you how you'd like to have a couple more banks added to Triple E?"

"Ted, that doesn't even merit a question. You may have put me in charge of Triple E, but it's you that actually knows finances and business, and what you can get away with. If you want to do it, feel free," Muriel said.

"Good. Because the ink is just drying on the paperwork, now. I just got back. I used your authority – signed 'for Muriel' as your representative," he said. The central computers are shut down, and I've got a crew in downloading the records for the past ten years, now."

"You . . . did . . . WHAT?" Melanie exclaimed. "You BOUGHT the banks?"

"Of course. That way we could get the records, and see who to apply the blame to. And more, we can track back and see who was actually making the transfers, and who was benefiting. Makes for interesting reading. Want a copy?" he asked, innocently. "I've only got two years worth, right now, but you're welcome to it. Oh, and that's not complete. It's only for selected accounts. But it does show where the money comes from and where it goes to. Including investments, which I don't think you considered." And Melanie started laughing. In seconds tears were streaming down her face, and she was out of breath.

"You know, Muriel, it's a good thing that my office is so close to yours," Fran said as she came in and went to Melanie. "OK, Melanie, deep breaths. Slowly. Come on, girl, you can do it." And slowly Melanie came out of it. "Muriel, it used to be fainting was your shtick. Have you changed to hysterics?"

"Not that I know of. Do you think I should? It WOULD make an interesting change," Muriel said. "How's Don?"

"Well, actually, I'm a bit worried about him," she replied.

"Oh?"

"Yea. I don't think he's getting enough sleep. He keeps saying I keep him up all night," she said, primly. And Muriel howled with laughter. "You bad, bad girl."

"I know. That's what he says." And Fran grinned. "How are you doing, Melanie? Better now?"

"Oh, dear. Oh, I think I'll do. It was just . . . here I was, worried about how to deal with the banks after the media exposed our plans, and Ted just goes and buys them. And suddenly, it was too much," Melanie said. "I feel like I've wandered into Wonderland. How?"

"Oh, that," Ted said. "It was actually pretty simple. The stock tanked when the media report came out. So, I drove it down further with small 'buys' at less than the asking price, and people sold. By the time I got to the major shareholders it was way down, and I just picked them up wholesale. And I've got 'don't leave the country' actions against the officers and boards of the banks, as well as 'claw backs' to try to recoup the money they were paid in bonuses and severance pay. That should hold them in the country long enough for you to go over the records and get warrants out for their arrest."

"Yea. That gives me some breathing space," Melanie said. "And when this is over, I think I'm going to retire to here, get a suite in the Guest House, and just loaf around and come in and see how you REALLY do it."

"You'd be more than welcome," Muriel said. "You don't take enough holidays and vacations as it is."

"Just a couple more years, and I can ditch this job and do just that. It isn't like I have to wait around until retirement," Melanie said. "All right, Ted, lead the way to this fabulous treasure of lies and deceit. I'd very much like to get a look at it."

As they left and Fran went back to her office, Henry turned to Muriel and said, "You know what her real problem is, don't you?"

"Yea. That mole. She was so sure, after that dust-up four years ago, that HS had been cleaned up. And now this," Muriel said.

"So, what are you going to do?"

"Telephone records. Emails. I doubt whoever is doing it is making physical drops or passes, but if necessary, I'll put Envoys on the employees and see what happens," she said. "We'll feed plausible sounding fictions into the system, and track where they come from and

go to. I'll also plant an Envoy in stealth in the office to see who pulls out a cell phone and takes pictures of documents."

"You think that's how they're passing?" he asked.

"Yep. I've seen some of the media reports. Newspapers are printing whole sections of documents. So it isn't word of mouth. Someone's passing whole documents," Muriel said. "I've often thought that HS should be dissolved, but to go down under such a stain could hurt the government."

"Well, the government's been hurt before. It'll heal. So, what kind of information are you going to insert into the system?" asked Henry.

"That I'm not actually an American citizen. There's been people after me for a long time, trying to make it look like I'm something I'm not – or not something that I am. It comes around, periodically. So, I'll just give it a bit of a boost," she said. "Hey, I'm used to being a target. And I'll make it laughable enough that it'll be easy to prove it wrong."

"How's that?"

"By phonying up a 'birth certificate', for one 'Muriel', female Envoy, from, oh, say, sixty million years ago, and using B.C.E to date it. First, Envoys are genderless. Second, NO records of the Envoys would use 'Before Common Era' for a date. That's a human convention. And third, Envoys aren't born, and don't have birth certificates," Muriel said. Henry was already laughing before she finished. "Oh, and fourth, how the heck would someone on earth get ahold of a PAPER birth certificate from Home? And to add insult to injury, Envoys weren't called Envoys back then. Plus, I'll even make a record of my MAKING the phony document, and inserting it into the system. You can even watch, and witness the making. Want your name on it, too, as the attending physician? Be sure to add your badge number."

"But," Ameera said, "we actually ARE Envoys. At least in part."

"Yes, we are. And we have Envoy names which aren't pronounceable even by an Envoy. They're purely mental names. Ask Mata," Muriel said. "She recognized my soul, before I actually connected deep enough to know. In fact, it CAUSED the connection to take place. And it shocked her so much that she tried to call me by that name. I think I should list Matthew and Betty as my parents on this fake. Then shock whoever believes it's true by PROVING that Envoys have no gender. Have both of them return to the form they used before I came along. Both men. Whoever gets ahold of this and believes it would be laughed at so hard that he or she would never be able to show their face in public again."

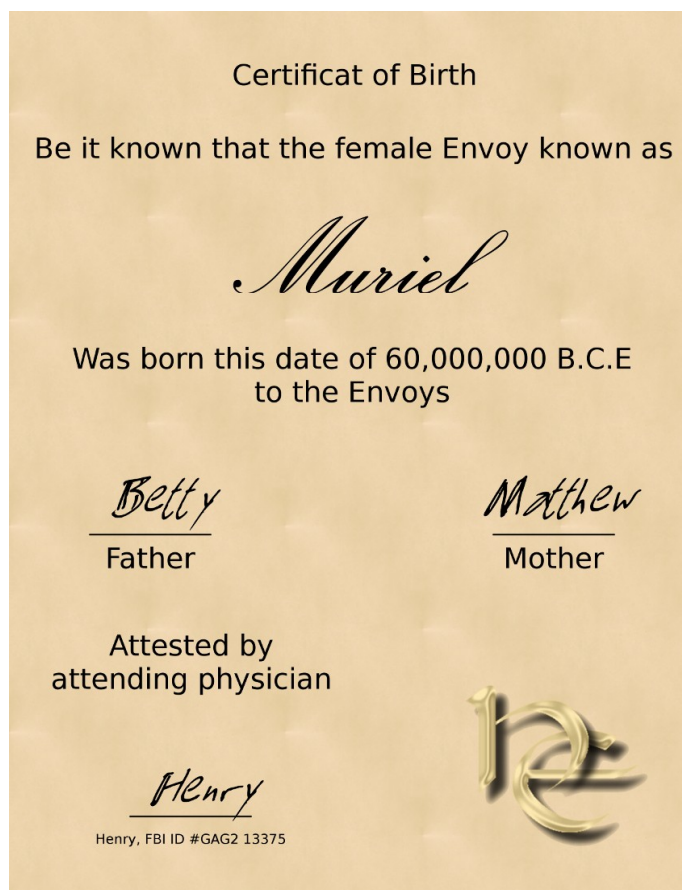
"So, you would make a laughingstock out of yourself to try to catch this mole?" Ameera asked.

"No. Oh, people will laugh, but not at me. They'll laugh at what I created and at whoever is stupid enough to fall for it," Muriel said. "Trust me, Ameera. I expect this to hit

some member of Congress. By that time, we should have the mole. Then we'll get the guy he's feeding. And yea, I'm pretty sure it's a member of Congress that's leaking this stuff to the media. But the fact is, it's still wrong. Henry, I want you to sign in three places. For father, write 'Betty'. For mother, write 'Matthew'. Then sign your first name on the bottom left."

"Um, Muriel? Don't you have that the wrong way around?" he asked. Then immediately reversed himself, "Oh. You want this to be REALLY ridiculous, don't you?"

"Yep," she said, and took a photo of it.



"And you really think someone is going to fall for this?" asked Henry.

"Just wait until Melanie gets back here. You'll see," Muriel grinned.

"Somebody call me?" Melanie asked, coming back into the casual area.

"Yep. I've got a photo for you to insert into the HS system, sometime. Very important document. It'll blow the lid off of the whole Envoy scam," Muriel said, and showed her the document. "I figure it would be better YOU putting it in the system with whatever cover you like than for me to do it."

"Your birth certificate? Why? . . . Oh, duh! This is so fake that NOBODY in their right

mind would believe it," Melanie said, laughing. "Oh, geez! You even had Henry sign it, and you've got his FBI ID number on it. Who do you expect to believe it?"

"Your mole, for one. He's going to see the top of this, and send it right off. And that's when we get a two-fer," Muriel said.

"A two-fer?" asked Ameera.

"She means that we get two for one, Ameera," Melanie said. "So, who's the second?"

"Somebody in Congress. I expect to get called up in front of some Congressional committee to explain this document. Then the REAL fun begins, as I destroy the reputation of some jerk that should never have been nominated for the post by his party, much less elected."

"Muriel, you are a bad, bad girl," Melanie laughed.

"Of course," she replied. "But it's so GOOD to be bad." And they all laughed.

"OK, can I get a photo? That's easier to put into the system. Oh, you've got one. Oh, and who should be the origin of the picture. Probably should be someone that has access to your office," Melanie said.

"Hmm. OK, hold on a minute," Muriel said. Then sent, ::Tommy? Thomas the Doubter. Can I see you in my office for a minute?::

"Sure, Muriel. What's up?" he asked, walking in. Muriel showed him the 'birth certificate' and he laughed. "So, what do you want done with this?"

"We're going to 'send' it to Melanie. Or, more precisely, she's going to insert it in the Homeland Security stream to catch a mole," Muriel said. "We need a cover letter that doesn't sound like me. Email is fine."

"And then you're going to take a picture, and send it out? Hmm. Yea, we can do that. I probably shouldn't send it to her, though. Have it something that she intercepted. Well, let's see," he said.

TO: JimmyMouthpiece
SUBJECT: Envoys
FROM: ThomasTheDoubter

Hey, Jimmy. Look what I got! She had it on her desk, and nobody was looking, so I swiped a flick. You won't believe it! Envoys are born! And she isn't really human, after all. Got the seal and everything. Man! Wait till THIS gets out!

Thomas the Doubter

"Something like that, Muriel?" he asked.

"Perfect. DANG! Guy, you're good. Caught the whole idea in a minimum of words, generated excitement, and used the sort of language that I've heard or seen geeks use. Kind of a cross between a geek and a fan. And I LOVE the nicknames. OK, so we print it and photograph it, and give the two to Melanie," Muriel said. Tommy just grinned.

"And I know just where to insert it. We have a filter on your name, Muriel, and on Envoy. And I know exactly which desks this goes to. And my suspected mole is NOT one of those desks. Which means that one of his friends in the department will send it to him. Muriel, do you know how to mask a computer?" asked Melanie. Muriel just pointed to Mata, who grinned.

"Who do you want me to be?" she asked.

"How about NSA?"

"No problem. We're in and out of them so often they think we're them," Mata said, laughing. "Any particular person?"

"Internal desk," Melanie said, with some disgust.

"Oh, him. Good choice. He probably WOULD bite on it. OK, here goes." And with a few key punches, the dirty deed was done. "Tracking," Mata said. "It's hit HS . . . and . . . it's been read and printed. OK, watching phones. Watching . . . watching . . . watch – oops, there it goes. Here's the name attached to the phone," Mata said, scribbling on a sticky note and handing it to Melanie.

Melanie looked blank for a moment, then grinned. "OK, one of my guys has just picked him up, and relieved him of the phone. We've got him. Thanks Mata. And thank you, Muriel. You're sure you can handle a Congressional committee?"

"Oh, sure. I'll probably get the 'request' this afternoon to come meet with them. Want to come watch the fun?" asked Muriel.

"I wouldn't miss it," Melanie replied. "What about the media?"

"Oh, they'll get theirs," Muriel said. "We'll send them a copy of the committee meeting, and show them that their 'usually reliable source' wasn't reliable after all. THIS is going to be fun. I get to make fools of whole bunches of people."

"Muriel," Mata said. "I've got the Congressman, too. It's our old friend the weenie. And he just sent it on to three papers and the local network affiliate news media."

"Frankfurter? Oh . . . my . . . gosh! He's harassed us since day one. I thought we'd taught him a lesson the last time," Muriel said. "Guess I was wrong."

"He won't head the committee," Melanie said. "He's too low on the totem pole. But he'll surely be there. No, the one that will head it is the throw-back to the McCarthy era. He thinks he's running an 'un-American Activities' committee. Watch your back."

"Always. But I know how to make him shut up. Just the fact that this can be proven to be a fake for the purpose of flushing out a mole will do it. He HATES to look small or stupid, and if he pushes this, he'll look like both," Muriel said with an evil grin. "I'll let you know as soon as I get the call. Then we can all have fun watching the jerks squirm." And waived 'good-bye' to Melanie and Henry.

Chapter 29

Congress on the Half Shell (Wednesday morning)

Muriel was right. She got the call to appear before a Senate Committee shortly after noon, Tuesday. And her appearance was for bright and early Wednesday morning. Melanie had also gotten the call, as she was nominally in charge of Homeland Security. Muriel had insisted that she would be bringing people with her, and at first the Senator had balked. But when the leader of a foreign nation says, "Fine, then you can come here, and I'll provide transportation," it tends to make someone think that maybe they'd rather be on their home ground. The additional people were approved.

Muriel showed up with Mata, Betty, Henry and Tommy, who was a bit nervous. Muriel had already clued him in as to what questions he could answer, and what ones to defer to her. Mata and Betty were no problem, since they'd become old hats at this. But Tommy had never done this before, and was intimidated by the setting – especially the fact that the committee was seated above them, behind a very formal looking bench, like one would find in court but larger.

"Senator," Muriel interrupted the politician heading the committee, "you have spent the past ten minutes talking without coming to the point. Now, either you get to the point or I'll leave. You're forgetting that you're speaking to the Leader of Home, and I'm here voluntarily. As it is, you're skating perilously close to being charged with attempting to break the treaty Home has with America. Quit grandstanding for the media, or talk to my lawyers in front of a Federal judge."

"Young lady, that is not the way you speak to us," the chairman said.

"Then you don't listen closely. Or at all. Get to the point or I leave. Now."

"Very well, you are charged with misrepresenting yourself to the State Department in order to obtain diplomatic credentials," he said.

"Oh, really. May I see your evidence?"

"I don't think that's necessary," he replied.

"Betty, Henry, Mata, Tommy, time to go," she said, standing up.

"Hold it, you don't seem to realize that you are under arrest on Federal charges."

"Yep, you can talk to my lawyer," Muriel said. "And then you can explain your resignation to the President, as they take you away to prison. You've just violated the treaty."

"You can't charge a sitting Senator," he said.

"I can for felonies. And so far you are racking them up. You ask me to come here to explain something. Now you're saying I'm charged with something, but you won't produce the evidence. Then you make the stupid blunder of saying that I'm under arrest. Now, if you'd behaved like a human being instead of a stuffed shirt, we could have cleared this all up quite quickly. Probably in less time than it's taken you to mouth off to me and grandstand for the cameras. Be advised, this IS being recorded, and Envoy records are recognized as true in court," Muriel said. "I will see the evidence you pretend to have, now, or you will be arrested as you leave this room, charged with violation of diplomatic immunity, violation of a long-standing treaty between Home and the United States, defamation of character, and all sorts of procedural errors."

"Very well, we have a copy of your birth certificate," he said, making no move to produce it.

"Really. Then you know that I am the daughter of Lily and Fred White by adoption. Parents unknown. Birth date estimated, but sixteen years ago," Muriel said.

"That's not what this document says."

"Well, since I haven't seen what you say you have, I can't very well answer to it."

"This," the Senator said, holding up a piece of paper, "is what I'm talking about." Muriel didn't bother being polite. She just 'no pocketed' it out of his hands, looked at it, and laughed.

"Senator, if you had bothered to look at the document, you'd have seen that it was a fraud. Here," she said, "there's no sense in people straining their eyes trying to read the photograph of a photograph." And she sent copies of her document to each of them, as well as sending the Senator's copy back to him. She also created a giant version of it suspended over the congressman's head, for the benefit of the cameras. "Now, I want you to look at the document. See anything strange about it? No? It purports to be a birth certificate made out sixty million years ago. IN ENGLISH! English wasn't invented then. And the date is ONLY a year, it's preprinted in, and it's listed as B.C.E. Can any of you bright boys tell me what B.C.E. stands for? No? Before Common Era. That nomenclature was adopted because there were people that objected to the term Before Christ. Not everyone is Christian, after all."

"Now, in addition, it lists an Envoy named Muriel," she added. "Again, Envoys didn't have human names at that time. And the names they had and have are not pronounceable with human equipment. Trust me, I've seen an Envoy try it, and it couldn't be done. And it lists a FEMALE Envoy. Envoys don't have bodies, therefore they don't have gender. They take whatever shape they need to to accomplish a task. And the names for my supposed parents. Father. Betty. Mother. Matthew. Really? Does it work that way in YOUR family. Attending physician. Well, Envoys don't need such, but I'll let that pass for the moment because that should have been the tip off that this was fake. Attending physician. Henry. Stand up, Henry, and read off your ID Number, please, so these men can compare it to the one under your signature." He did, and the gallery began laughing. Even some of the

Senators were chuckling.

“And now for the major tip off. My parents.”

Betty stood up and said her name. Then Mata stood up and said her name, then grew and changed gender, and said, “Matthew.” As Mata changed, so did Betty. They changed back and sat down.

“Want more? This was accompanied by what was purported to be an email. It did NOT include the raw email with all the header and routing information, because it was never sent. It was handed to my security chief, who inserted it in an NSA stream to Homeland Security for the purpose of flushing out a mole that was sending information out that eventually landed in the hands of the media. They already have a copy of this document, and have been having a field day with it. They are going to be extremely upset to find out that it was a hoax perpetrated on someone violating security procedures. Homeland Security is full of holes. It would better be called Homeland insecurity. Or, even better still, not called at all, but just disbanded for being a useless piece of bureaucratic nonsense. The supposed email was created on my computer, photographed, and handed off to Mata with the document you hold.” Muriel stopped and tapped Tommy on the shoulder.

Tommy stood up and said, “I am Ambassador Tommy. My profession is philosopher, so my friends call me Thomas the Doubter or Doubting Thomas as a joke. I wrote that supposed email in order to lend credence to the unobservant.” Then he sat down.

“One more thing, which is not common knowledge but is no secret. Since Envoys have no body, they don't give birth. Envoys are soul. And soul is nothing more than power that has attained sufficient complex connections to become self-aware,” Muriel said. “Now, as to the order of operations. Melanie came to me and asked for my unofficial assistance in finding the mole in HS. So, we cooked up this little charade and sent it off. Sure enough, the mole bit on it, and printed the email and birth certificate, and sent them on further. Melanie, over to you.”

“Senator Frankfurter, you are charged with ten counts of violating the official secrets act,” Melanie said. “You are further charged with espionage, and may be charged with treason. Please don't repeat the stupidity that you can't be arrested. These are Federal felony charges and supersede that quaint convention. Officers, place him under arrest and transport him, please.” Two Secret Service officers appeared behind the Senator and helped him to his feet, then cuffed him and read him his rights. When he'd been removed from the chamber, Melanie sat down.

“Senator,” Muriel said to the committee chairman, “our business is done. And I'm going to make a suggestion. If you don't want to appear stupid, again, when faced with something concerning Home, it would be best if you simply contacted us and TALKED to us. That is, if you're still in office. The record of this – Envoy record, that is – will be going to the media, so they can make their apologies to the public and learn to do a better job of fact checking. Had you behaved better, you might have been spared the embarrassment that you're bound to experience as a result of this farce. This meeting is adjourned,” she added, then gathered her friends and translated out of the chamber before the Senator could object to her adjourning

the meeting.

“Melanie, Henry, thank you for your support,” she said, disgusted.

“My pleasure, Muriel. So that's how it's done. Threaten the bastard to silence, then run right over the top of him,” said Henry, grinning. “I thought he was going to choke when you arrested Frankfurter. But then you topped it by adjourning the meeting HE'D called. Well done.”

“Thanks, I think. Tommy, you did just right. Thank you for being there for me.”

“I won't say 'my pleasure', Muriel. I was scared stiff,” her friend said. “But I HAD to be there. I couldn't let you face that alone.”

“Well, I'm glad you did. I'd just like to get that jerk here for about a half hour or so, and find out what his problem REALLY is,” Muriel said.

“That can be arranged,” Melanie said, and suddenly the Senator was standing in front of her, with a shocked and puzzled expression on his face.

“Sit down, Senator Coombs. We're going to talk. Coffee? Tea? Milk? Pop? Water?” she said, as she took her seat in the casual area.

“What is this?” he demanded.

“Enclave,” Muriel said. “And this is going to go much easier on you if you lose the attitude. I don't know what your problem with me is, but I'm going to find out, one way or another. Make it easy on yourself and talk. Why are you out to get me?”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Senator, I've been in this job for four years. I've had people shoot at me – government people at that. I've had media down on me without even knowing why. I've had religions down on me. And through it all I've done everything I can to support and defend the country in which I was born. I've found conspiracies and eliminated them and the threat they made to the country. I've been instrumental in buying up companies and straightening out the mess that the economy was in. I've shown you people in Congress, over and over again, that an expensive military establishment is NOT the way to go. And for four years, everywhere I turn, there you are trying to 'prove' that I'm not what I say I am. And I'm DAMN sick and tired of it,” she said. “That whole fiasco, just a few minutes ago, could have been solved very quickly without you being embarrassed publicly. But instead, you had to play the 'big man', and bully the little girl. I wasn't kidding about seeing you in court. If we don't get this straightened out, now, that's where you'll be. You're almost as guilty as Frankfurter for this last episode. Talk.”

“I don't like being threatened, young lady.”

“Really. Well, I've got news for you. Neither do I. And you're a Senator, and I'm the

Leader of Home. And, until today, I've been very careful about even looking like I was threatening you. But you went over the edge, today. I will NOT be bullied. I am a human being and have rights that you have constantly tried to trample. I have a job to do, just as you do. But I don't go around bullying people unless they've shown that they're trying to bully me. Now, answer the question."

"I don't like your attitude."

"Attitude! Mister, until today, my attitude has been extremely helpful and and pleasant toward you. Have you considered that what you see as my attitude may simply be the reflection of the attitude you constantly project? Would it hurt you to behave in a civilized manner and not constantly try to attack people. There's a time and a place for that, and when dealing with people that are on your side is NOT the time or the place."

"That's it. I'm leaving," said the Senator.

"Nope. You're staying right here until we find out what your problem is," Muriel said. "There are three ways we can do this. We can talk, pleasantly, and have it all out. Or, I could take you to Home, and let the Judgment take you. Oh, I'd bring you back, but it would probably break you. Or, I can just go in after it, mentally." And she saw the twinge as she said the last. "That's it, isn't it. You're afraid that I'd be able to find out things that you don't want found out. Under normal circumstances I wouldn't do it. You have NO idea how disgusting the minds of even the most innocent looking of people can be. It takes a lot to get me to do that. Plus, it just isn't ethical under normal circumstances. And these are still normal circumstances, so far. So, which way would you prefer?"

"Why should I trust you?"

"Because, right now, I'm the only friend you have. And I don't mean just here. I DO hear things, and people talk. I'm trying to give you a chance to redeem yourself, to better yourself. And as long as you act like an asshole, I'm shut out. So then, my only recourse is court, where you'd lose your position as Senator at the very least. It could also mean jail time and/or a hefty fine. Oh, and one other thing. I'm ethical. I HAVE to be. I know what the Judgment is – I've been through it. In fact, I've been through it many times, because I've been in and out of Home many times. And it hits me every time. Most people only go through it once, after they die. And some don't even survive that. I've got friends here and all over the world, now, that have gone to Home and come back under their own power. They've all gone through the Judgment and survived it, and take steps to make sure that it's never as hard as the first time. THAT'S why you can trust me."

"So, how come you've got all these powers? Why not other people?" he asked.

"Good. I think we're finally getting to it. Senator, the abilities are available to anyone, with one qualification. If your life is messed up with having hurt people in any way, then taking the training completely – meaning finally going to Home and back – could kill you. And I don't mean just bodily death. I mean soul death. You'd hit Judgment Square and your soul would suicide from the guilt and shame. There's another risk, too. There are a lot of souls of

humans, there. And not all of them had pleasant lives, and many of them have guilt that they're trying to reduce. It can be very depressing for a human to go there bodily. I know. It happened to me when I was twelve. It wasn't my first time there. But the circumstances were such that I got hammered. Without the support of friends, I might have suicided when I got back. It was that bad," Muriel said.

"Now, for the up side of this. I can tell when someone is able to take it. When their balance isn't so far toward black that it would cause them trouble. It's a simple test, and you control it. All you have to do is make a mental link. Those that can't are hiding things in their lives – pain that they've caused others, things they've left undone, things they've done that they shouldn't have done. Even with any of those, if you want to learn, we've got people that can help you. One of them is only a few short steps away, and he's a fully licensed counselor and VERY ethical." Muriel took a breath, then said, "It's up to you. If you WANT to learn, we can teach you the basics that we give anyone that wants to learn, then show you how to build on them."

"And the cost?" he asked.

"Free. That includes food, clothing, shelter, medical as necessary, entertainment, and all sorts of other perks. For as long as it takes. So far, the longest has been four days, and that was my parents. The shortest was about a quarter of a day, and she was exceptional. Still is. She's the Ambassador for Home to the People of Russia, and she's younger than I was when I started. But she was ready," Muriel said.

"And all I have to do is make a mental link. To you?" he asked.

"Would you prefer someone else? That can be arranged," she said.

"Who?"

"Lots of people. One of my friends is the best trainer I've seen. Even better than many Envoys. Actually, any of my friends can train. Or Melanie, or Henry. They're both trained, and know how to do it. They've trained others. Or, we can get an Envoy to train you. There are lots of them around, and all of them would be happy to help," she said.

"There's other Envoys around?"

"See the room behind me, and the desks across the room?" Muriel said. "All Envoys. Those are my security squads. And babysitters," she added with a smile.

"So, how do I do this?"

"We play a game, naturally," Muriel said. "Look at me. Can you reach me without getting up?"

"Huh? No, of course not."

“Good. Take a good look at me. Try to memorize what I look like. Then close your eyes, and see me in your mind. How far away I am. So, pretend that you get up and come over to me. Put your hand on my shoulder and say 'hi'.”

She watched him as he closed his eyes, then seemed to concentrate, hard. “Ease up. Don't try to force it, just let it happen, like you did it every day and it was nothing.” She saw him relax, then felt his hand on her shoulder, and smiled.

::What am I supposed to say?::

::You already did. Yes, you can be trained,:: she sent back. “Now, let's fix the headache and go to lunch. Then we'll get you a room, and start your training. There's one section where I WON'T be able to do the training, but we'll get to that, and I have lots of people to draw on to teach you that.” And she fed him some power and raised his blood sugar some, and felt the headache go away.

Chapter 30

O Wad Some Power (Wednesday afternoon)

"How's the steak, Senator?" the restaurant manager asked.

"Great! Is the food here always like this?"

"Oh, yes. We pride ourselves on giving the customer what he wants," the manager said.

"Well, you certainly succeeded with me," the Senator said, and went back to eating as the manager left on the rest of his rounds.

"Hi, Muriel," Fran said, walking up behind the Senator and placing one hand on his shoulder. "Who's this. OH! Senator Coombs. Good afternoon. Mind if I crash this party, Muriel?"

"Not at all. Grab a chair. There's a waiter coming, now," Muriel said.

"Oh, good. I'm famished. Long morning. One kid actually managed to break his leg, along with all the assorted bumps, bruises and scrapes I usually see. Oh, and another had measles. Didn't know it yet. He was just starting a fever when I got to him," Fran rambled on, then took her hand off the Senator's shoulder and walked around the table. "I'm sorry, Senator, I should have introduced myself. I'm Fran. One of Muriel's original friends. I'm one of the two doctors for Enclave. No, I'll take that back. All of my squad are doctors, too, but only two of us are boss doctors," she said, grinning.

"So young?"

"Envoy style medicine. More effective than human, and much easier to practice. For example, when you go back to your doctor be prepared to call 911 for him. He might have a heart attack when he finds out that you're cured."

"WHAT?"

"It's cured. Gone. Everything else is in good shape. So, when do you start training?" Fran asked.

"After lunch," Muriel said. "I was thinking of borrowing your boyfriend to teach the Senator how to make clothes."

"Borrow away, if you can find him. He's off and gone in one of his projects, again. His body's in his office, but his mind is somewhere in the middle ages."

"Well, that complicates things a bit, but there are others that can help. We'll manage," Muriel said. "So, you've got no idea what he's working on, now?"

"Vaguely. He and Aslam were going to go back to the Crusades together and see if they could make sense out of playing both sides. I think he'll have to break it up into two sections, myself. Maybe more. But you know him," Fran said.

"Yep. Has to find out for himself, and over thinks things."

"Yep, that's Donny. Oh, Senator, I'm sorry, we were kinda excluding you," Fran said.

"That's all right. I was fascinated by the conversation. I take it that this Donny is another of your friends?"

"Yep. We kinda grew up together," Fran said. "Then, about a year ago, he decided that he liked me. It's grown. He's a teacher, if Muriel didn't tell you. Goes around to various schools and literally shows them what history was like at the time, and fills in around the actions with what was happening in music, the arts, math and science, medicine, stuff like that. And shows the kids what life at various levels of society were like. Makes complete presentations that take about an hour to go through. I've learned more about history than I thought I'd ever want to. But the way he teaches it makes it fascinating."

"Muriel said something about his being a trainer. Is that what she meant?" asked the Senator.

"No, that's different. When she says trainer, she's talking about Envoy techniques. And at that, he's a genius. He's gotten people through the training that I would have given up on. And we pride ourselves on NOT giving up," Fran said. "And no, that's not cocky. It's her fault," and she pointed to Muriel. "We're all in competition with her, in a way. She just doesn't give up. She'll take impossible people and get them through it as if it were nothing special to her."

"Don't let her kid you, Senator," Muriel said. "She does some impossible things, herself. Like when a man had a heart attack as he came in my office. She and two of her doctors worked on him on my recliner in the office – flattened out, of course. Five minutes his heart was stopped. Then he was sitting up, and finally standing on his own. No pain. No further problems with his heart or arteries. And still going strong. And NO cutting. Just the way she worked on you."

"How?"

"I work on a cellular level, Senator. But fast. And Muriel isn't kidding about the man being up and around even now. That was back when I was twelve, and his doctor gave him days, maybe weeks. Ask him, yourself. He's the Secretary of Education."

"WHAT?"

"Truth. Ask him. Muriel, how are you going to handle the Senator. I know you played 'knock, knock' with him. Are you going back to the old way?" asked Fran.

"Nope. I wanted to make sure he could make it. That's the only reason I pulled the test. He passed. So, when we get back I'll get him connected, and we can go from there."

"OK. I'll tear Donny away – oh, that's Don, to you, Senator. I'm the only one that can call him Donny – away from his history and have him take him through clothing. From the look of the suit he's wearing, maybe have the manager of the clothing store with him," Fran said.

"Sounds good. If not, I'll take him to his room, call the clothing manager, and have him and the Guest House Envoys take care of it," Muriel said.

"Naw. I'll get him. I know how to break him away. Donny's good about it. That kid with the broken leg? I hollered for Donny, and he kept the kid occupied while I worked. He even kept the kid's parents occupied. He's only grumpy with you. Clue. It's all an act," Fran grinned.

"Clue," Muriel said. "I know. And I let him do it. Look, I'm going to take this poor man out of here and go to work on him. Let me know when Don's free, and I'll turn him loose on the Senator." And Muriel escorted the Senator back to her office.

When they were comfortable, she explained how Envoys were created from complex power. She stressed that they were soul, only, no body, whereas humans were soul IN a body. It took a bit, but the connection came, and Muriel encouraged him to just let it run, that it wouldn't hurt him, and the more connected it was the easier all the rest would be.

"OK now, Senator?" she asked as he seemed to come out of it.

"Oh, my. I don't know. Am I still me?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. The human personality is always dominant," Muriel said. "You have a lot more experiences to draw on, now, and you're connected to power because of your soul. It was always there, but not available to you until you made the connection. I think you'll find that learning things, now will be easier for you, and you'll remember them better. That's because you're no longer limited to the human brain. You can pass the information straight to your soul, and it will understand it easier and better than you've been able to, before. Now, let's work on your shields."

"Shields? Did someone say shields?"

"Hi, Don. How's the project going," asked Muriel.

"Done. Well, for right now. I need Aslam to help me fine tune it. Fran might be right. I might need to section it, and that's another thing to talk to Aslam about. I don't really want to

section it along religious lines. But finding a break point is tough,” Don said.

“Well, anyway, Don, this is Senator Coombs. He just made his connection, and it looks like it went deep. I was about to show him the new shields we use,” Muriel said.

“Hmm. Yea. Old style shields. Senator, that's not something against you. Four years ago, when Muriel was being trained, she realized there was a potential problem with the way the Envoys constructed shields, and she came up with better ones. Ones strong enough to hold up to a bomb, and anchored in such a way that you could be shot at and the only thing that would tell you is the sound. Muriel,” Don said, “why don't you get ahold of the clothier while I work with the Senator. Um”

“He's got a space. I found out a couple of weeks ago. We were giving him so much business, that he created a room to train people in. Not very large, but room enough for about five at a time,” she said.

“He's training?”

“Yea, every once in a while. He's had five breakthroughs so far. I'd have thought you knew,” she said.

“Nope. He never called me. OK, get hold of him and tell him about fifteen minutes, please.”

“Yes sir!” Muriel mock saluted.

Don went to work while Muriel translated out. The manager of the clothing store had no problem with helping to teach the Senator how to create his own clothes, and did, indeed have a room that was private. Muriel also found out that he was being backed up by Ted and a couple of the lawyers, and felt more comfortable about his training people. The Envoy was focused almost entirely on clothes, and she'd been worried that he might be neglecting the rest of the training. But in fact, he was simply alerting Ted or one of the lawyers when he came across someone close to breakthrough, and they were doing the training. He was just helping with the clothes. And the manager was truly excited to be a part of the training process. So, when she got back to her office, Muriel was in good spirits, and just in time to see Don swing his bat.

“And . . . another successful shield. Oh, hello Muriel. Fancy you showing up, here,” he said.

“Yea, every once in a while I put in an appearance and pretend to work,” she replied. The Senator chuckled.

“From what I've seen, young lady, you run a very tight ship by being relaxed about it,” he said.

“Oh, there are some formalities. Please and thank you, mostly. You'd be surprised

how well people respond to little courtesies. Even Don, the grumpy bear,” she said, grinning.

“We can finish out the training. It shouldn't take more than an hour, and that would give you time for your afternoon nap,” Don asked. “I know you missed your morning one, so I thought I'd be nice.”

“Why, if you'd like to. I wouldn't want to overwork you. You've been looking rather thin and peaked, lately,” she replied.

Don ran his hands over his ample belly and said, “I'm just big boned.”

“Yea. Beef bones, chicken bones, turkey bones, fish bones. All of them big,” Muriel responded. And by this time the Senator was laughing.

“You people are unbelievable. Are you always like this?” he asked.

“Yea, usually,” Don replied. “We were friends long before Muriel dragged us, kicking and screaming, out here to be trained. Of course, what helped was we saw her hold off about twenty bullies without even bothering to notice them, then get shot at and not hurt. Kinda motivates a kid to learn. And as for kidding each other, well, it used to be to relieve tensions and anger. Now? It's just a way of saying, 'I like you, too'.”

“How are you doing, Senator?” asked Muriel.

“This . . . this is like being able to stand outside myself and see what I'm doing from the viewpoint of someone else,” he said.

“‘O wad some Power the giftie gie us, To see oursels as ithers see us! It wad frae mony a blunder free us, An' foolish notion’,” Muriel said.

“What IS that from? I've heard it so many times, but nobody would tell me what it's from. And you added more to it,” the Senator said.

“Robert Burns, the Scottish Bard,” Muriel said. “And you're going to just LOVE the title of the poem. ‘To A Louse, On Seeing One On A Lady's Bonnet, At Church.’ Now, isn't THAT an image. The rest of the quotation goes, ‘What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us, An' ev'n devotion!’ And I think of that when I look at the balance. It kinda kills the interest in trying to make out that I'm better than I am. Oh, I'm still outrageous. That goes without saying.”

“Then why'd you say it?” asked Don.

“Well, it goes WITH saying, too,” she said, and stuck out her tongue at him.

“Yes, and that quotation is outrageous, too, and I'll have to find the whole poem, now,” the Senator said.

“Well, there's places on the Internet that explain some of the Scots words he used in

his poetry. And the poem really is outrageous. It is literally all about a louse, but behind all the talk is the realization that the young lady has NO idea what's going on with her hat, or how ridiculous the situation is. And that's where the last few lines come from. Burns realization that people see more than the put-ons that one uses," Muriel said. "At least when I'm outrageous I WANT people to see beyond it."

"Well, I'll get Senator Coombs over to the clothier, and have some fun. You'll make sure he has a room ready in Guest House?" asked Don.

"Yep. And Envoys to show him around and stuff. Senator, why don't you come by tomorrow morning, and we'll give you an idea of what can be done with your new techniques. OK?" asked Muriel.

"Sure," he replied, and he and Don left.

Chapter 31

The Best-laid Schemes (Thursday morning)

"YOU! You scheming, lying, conniving woman, it's ALL YOUR FAULT!"

"Calm down, Henry. I don't even know what you're talking about. And I haven't seen you since yesterday, when we brought Senator Coombs to Enclave. And I've been busy with him," Muriel said. "What am I supposed to have schemed, lied and connived about?"

"You know very well. You set your friends on me. Four of them. IN SUITS! And with FBI Identification cards," he said.

"Muriel," Melanie said, translating in, "Did you send your friends to the head of the Secret Service? Because suddenly there's three of them running around with Secret Service identification. And guns."

"Guns. Oh, gad! I didn't think to check," Henry said and paused. "Yep. They've got guns, too."

"I just said they did," Melanie replied.

"Not yours. I'VE got the OTHER FOUR!" Henry exclaimed.

"Whoa, wait a minute, gang. I had nothing to do with it. I was busy with Senator Coombs. Honest. He's trained," Muriel said.

"All I know is that the President found out, and now he wants them on his detail. KIDS!" Melanie said. "And he's interviewing them, right now!"

"You think YOU'VE got it bad. Adam wants ME to shepherd all four of them, and teach them the ropes. How am I supposed to get anything done?" asked Henry.

"Let them do it," Muriel replied.

"WHAT!" they both shouted.

"I'm not going to repeat myself to what, under normal circumstances, appear to be normal, healthy, functioning adults. They may be young, but they're much more mature than you might think. And, they're trained, and have been in some hairy situations since they were twelve. Show them how to do the job, and give them some responsibility, and you'd be surprised at the results you'll get. Oh, that doesn't mean load them down with the whole thing right off the bat. But you both know how to work a rookie into the system. So, DO it," Muriel said. And before she could go further, seven sixteen year olds translated in. Four in dark

suits and three in gray ones.

“Oh, no!” Henry said. “They followed us.”

“Actually, no,” one of the girls said. “We came by to let Muriel know that we wouldn’t be available for emergencies for a while. And sir? We’re not your responsibility. Your boss and his both agreed that it wouldn’t be a good idea. I’m sorry you thought we would be, sir.”

“And you three?” asked Muriel.

“Much the same. We went to the head of the Secret Service and explained who we were and what we were, and that we’d like to learn. He agreed. He put us in the charge of an experienced officer that was willing to show us the ropes. And the first thing he suggested is that we project the image that the Secret Service has. Much like what happened with the FBI and the other kids,” one of the boys in gray said.

“What about training? And guns?” Muriel asked.

“No problem,” the boy replied. “We’ve all been in extensive physical training, plus our abilities helped us develop our bodies. And as for guns,” he added, and handed Muriel his.

Muriel looked at it. It certainly looked like a standard issue Secret Service gun, but something was wrong with the barrel. She looked again, and busted out laughing.

“We don’t really need them,” the boy said, “because of our training. But we’re supposed to have them. So we compromised.”

Muriel was still laughing as she pointed it at the boy and pulled the trigger. A stream of water shot out and hit his shield, and the water disappeared before it even hit the floor. At that point, even Melanie was laughing. Henry just shook his head.

“I suppose you four are armed the same way,” he said.

“Of course. We can’t let the department down, sir. After all, we’re better than that old Secret Service,” the girl said with a grin that belied her feelings toward the Secret Service. Finally, Henry was laughing.

“I thought you guys were supposed to be following Bob’s people around,” Muriel said. “What happened to that?”

“Oh that,” one of the boys in a dark suit said. “We’d talked with Mister Garcia for a while. A couple of weeks, I think. We wanted to find out what he believed police work should be. Finally he suggested that we follow his people around and see for ourselves what it was like in Enclave. We never intended to join his squads permanently, and he knew it. In fact, he was the one that suggested who to talk to, and how to go about it.”

“So, we did,” said the one in gray. “And this morning we got to play statue in the oval

office, seeing and hearing everything without seeing or hearing a thing. Interesting experience. Fun, in a way. Of course, the President knew about it, and that we'd be there for a while this morning. Just before we left, he came over to us and shook our hands and laughed and kidded with us, impressed that we wanted to learn and that we were interested in law enforcement. Of course, he's used to having trained people around him, what with Melanie's squads. He got a kick out of the guns."

"What about parental approval?" asked Muriel.

"No sweat," the boy replied. "About a month ago, we all went to our parents and explained that we were interested in finding jobs, and wanted the permission to act on our own. We all went to court and got the same type of emancipation that Fran and Don have. And we've got rooms in Guest House, for now. Muriel," he said, "we've been working on this for a long time. We covered all the bases, and took our time. Honest."

"Oh, I believe you. You've always been good kids, and you've always shown that you were responsible."

"Yea. Whatever happened, we were responsible," said a voice from the back, which caused a brief snicker from Muriel .

"Well, I'll miss having you around, but I firmly agree with what you're doing. And you all know that I'm always here. Except when I'm not. And there may be times when we still end up working together," Muriel said.

"That's one of the reasons that we all got taken on by the FBI and Secret Service," the girl in the dark suit said. "They KNOW that we've worked with you, and can do so again, easily. And both agencies see this as a way of getting the two agencies to work more closely with each other. We're not being paid for this, Muriel. It's like an internship. That was another thing that swayed the decisions. But we have the full authority and backing of the agencies if we need it."

"We've also played a lot of 'what if' scenarios," said the boy in gray. "Both singly and as groups. We'd set up in the hills that are out back of Maintenance, when we knew they wouldn't be used for something else. And one of the guys found out about the training complexes that the Secret Service and FBI use for teaching their people how to deal with hostage situations and small arms proficiency, and built one like it on another piece of the wasteland. We got a couple of Seals to come in and teach us how they do it."

"You DID pay them didn't you?" asked Muriel.

"Of course."

"Then let me know what it cost, and Enclave will reimburse you. That shouldn't come out of your pocket," Muriel said with finality.

"Already covered. And it didn't come out of our funds. It was all charged against

Enclave, and Ted paid it without any question.”

“Wait a minute! You mean Ted knew about this, and never told me?”

“A girl's gotta have SOME secrets,” the girl in black said, grinning. Then she suddenly looked serious, and looked at the other 'junior' FBI agents. “Muriel, our shepherd is calling. We'll talk more, later.” And all four winked out.

“Well, that kinda broke up that little get-together,” said the boy in gray. “The only thing I'll add to the discussion is that we all decided we WOULDN'T play on the fact that we know Henry and Melanie. OR go to them to try to get in. We didn't want any accusations of favoritism or discrimination involved in this. We did this on our own, solely based on who and what we are, and what we can do and PROVE we can do. What Marcia didn't tell you is that they made us prove that we could shoot, at standing targets, moving targets, and act in hostage situations. We didn't really fire guns. We hit the targets with a nine millimeter shield at the proper speed. Charlie even made a smiley face in the three inch bull's eye. Drove the inspector crazy. We each ran the shoot house run under the time of their best officer, and with a perfect score. The hostage situation was a joke. Knife to the throat of the 'victim'. We shielded the 'victim' before even going in, and pulled a Melanie on the 'perp'. It was a walk through for us, and we did it in under a minute.”

“What would you do in a multiple hostage, multiple perp situation?” asked Melanie.

“Call for trained help, and much the same thing but coordinated between us. The hostages come first, and before we even go in. Then it's just 'cuff and stuff' the perps,” he replied.

“Can I get you to work for me?” Melanie answered back, and Muriel laughed.

“They really have thought this out, Melanie. And I'll bet it was the Seals that showed them how to do that last one,” Muriel said.

“Oh, heck, they taught us all of that. Not just the hostage stuff. By the way, they were trained Seals. And I don't just mean the Budweiser badge. They had Envoy training, and trained themselves that way. And we improved on a couple of their tricks, and they're now using them. Great guys, and when they get a chance, they'd like to meet you.”

“Easily done, Bruce. Any time. Well, any time that I'm not in the middle of an emergency, anyway,” Muriel replied.

“Well,” Bruce said, “we'd better get back before our shepherd misses us.”

“Whoa, wait a minute. Both sets of you kids use the same reference to 'your shepherd' and it just occurred to me that it might not be a reference. WHO is 'your shepherd'?” asked Melanie.

“Why, Thomas Shepherd. You know him, don't you?”

"Oh, yes. And he just happens to have a twin in the FBI. Henry, we were set up by our bosses. The other one's GOT to be Richard Shepherd. The only reason they split up is because neither agency would hire both of them. And they both firmly believe that the agencies should get along and not fight with each other," Melanie said.

"Richard Shepherd. Of course. 'Our Shepherd' indeed. Subtle. About as subtle as a nuclear weapon. And we fell for it," Henry said. "I must say, though, that if he's the one mentoring the kids, that they couldn't have a better one. Quick to know when a recruit isn't going to work out, but backs one that he thinks can make it with everything he's got. And good at teaching honest police work."

"Yep. Pretty much describes Thomas, too," Melanie said. "OK, you guys can go report back to 'your Shepherd'. And I'll keep my eye on you to see how you're doing."

"So will I with the other half of you kids. As long as I don't have to be the one to mentor you guys and gals, it doesn't bother me so much," Henry said. "I'm certainly not worried about any of you getting hurt."

As the three in gray translated out, Henry suddenly said, "You know, it just occurred to me. Richard Shepherd is on the Hostage Rescue Team."

"WHAT!" Muriel exclaimed. "My friends are in a high risk team?"

"Relax, Muriel," Melanie said. "They wouldn't be doing anything that they didn't do with you. Besides, I doubt that they'll actually see any action."

"Wait a minute. Isn't Thomas Shepherd on the President's detail?" asked Melanie.

"SHIT! They managed to get on the two high risk sections. I'll MURDER those kids when they get back," Muriel fumed.

"Well, that'll teach them. Come back to an even higher risk friend. Yep. I'd say that would do it," Ted said, as he walked in.

"And YOU KNEW!"

"Nope. Oh, I knew they were training. And that they'd 'rented' a pair of Navy Seals to help them. Obviously I knew about that, as I paid the bills. But I just thought that they were trying to get themselves ready for the next time you called out the troops," Ted said. "After all, it's not much different that some of the stuff you pulled. And the Seals even offered to give back the money, when the kids came up with ways of doing things that improved on what the Seals, themselves, did."

"And here I was trying to come up with something nice and safe that the kids could do," Muriel said.

“So, what's got you in such a lather?” asked Ted.

“The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men Gang aft agley,” said Muriel.

“What?” asked Melanie.

“Go often awry,” said Muriel. “Robert Burns used Scots dialect in his poetry.”

“What? More quotes?” asked Henry.

“Yep. 'To A Mouse, On Turning Her Up In Her Nest With The Plough', which compared the trials and tribulations of humans and mice. That was the pivotal point of the poem. So pivotal that John Steinbeck used part of the quotation as the title of his story, 'Of Mice and Men'. THAT was a depressing story. Definitely social commentary.”

“Good grief,” Henry said. “Our little girl is becoming literate.” Muriel just stuck her tongue out at him, and he laughed.

Chapter 32

We Don't Know How . . . (Thursday afternoon)

“ . . . hostage rescue team was nearby, and responded. We have video of the amazing rescue operation from the point of view of one of the rescuers. The time stamps seem wrong, but we've been assured that this is exactly how it happened.”

“GO, MARCIA!” came the voice of Don from the break room area of Muriel's office.

“WHAT?” hollered Muriel, and immediately translated to a vacant seat in the area.

On screen there appeared to be a transparent view of a house. She noticed that in one room there was a woman tied to a chair, and a man standing nearby. Two other men appeared to be walking back and forth near the front and back of the house. The view moved away, and Muriel could see three of her friends. The view was apparently from the standpoint of Marcia. So, this was obviously a record made by Marcia. Suddenly, the scene changed, and Marcia was behind the woman in the chair, and her ropes simply dissolved. Off to her right, Muriel could see one of the boys cuffing the man and bundling up weapons, very professionally. Then there was a pause of about a minute, where the two apparently communicated with each other and perhaps her other two friends. Then the scene changed again, and her erstwhile FBI agents handed the three men over to uniformed officers – what looked like sheriffs uniforms. The woman was put in the charge of another sheriff's deputy – a woman.

“And that was it for the hostage crisis in this small, California community. No one was hurt, and the whole thing was over in two minutes, according to the time ticks. We've asked for confirmation” A hand appeared in the view, holding a piece of paper. “And it appears we have that confirmation. According to this, this is a special FBI Hostage Rescue team made up of . . . is this right? It IS? Alright, made up of sixteen year old children on internship to the FBI. The reason for the lack of travel time in and out of the building is due to the Envoy training that they've received. They were apparently trained in forced entry hostage rescue by Navy Seals. We have no idea how they managed to make the video, since none of them were wearing helmets or glasses to which a camera could be mounted.”

“WAY TO GO, MARCIA!” Don shouted.

“Wait a minute! You mean that YOU knew about this?” Muriel asked.

“Of course,” Don said. “It used to be fun to watch them run the shoot house. I even got to play hostage one time. I died.”

“I'm going to KILL them,” Muriel growled. “Then I'm going to bring them back and KILL THEM AGAIN.”

"Muriel," Bobby said, from the other side of Don, "they only did what we ALL did. Went after what interested them, and kept it quiet until they were sure. They're aiming to become an International Hostage Rescue team. The elite of the elite. You should have heard the Seals when they came up with new ways of doing things. Did you know, for instance, that what we do in the air can be done in water? And without leaving a wake? And without getting wet? True. And the Seals hadn't thought of that. Did you know that it only takes about one second to dissolve a six foot circle through one inch plate? And it's silent. Suddenly, a ship is going down, and the enemy doesn't know why. There's other things, too. Muriel, they're smart. They think. And they try to cover all the possibilities before they do something."

"But THIS!"

"Muriel," Don said. "You're thinking that it's dangerous. For a normal human, it is. But what Marcia did was to THINK – to use our training to eliminate the risk. For example, just by looking at the speed of the maneuver, everyone in that house was locked in a shield and unable to attack BEFORE they went in. All she and her gang had to do was go in and collect them. So the time it took was just to relieve them of their weapons, and cuff them, then translate out."

"You make it sound like she's in charge."

"She is. She studied every action that you initiated. How you did it. Determined why you took certain actions. And copied your purpose, if not your methods. And then she came to me and asked me how I construct my presentations," Don said. "What you saw was a combination of what we do when we translate coupled with how I make those presentations. And to think that I'd never thought to do that. She sees applications for the training where others see a stop point."

"You know her father was a cop," Bobby said. "He was killed in the line of duty three years ago. And it leveled her at first. Then it angered her, and she pestered the chief until he told her what happened. She took that information and analyzed it with what could have been done with the training. And that started it. She's been passing the information back to the FBI and Secret Service, and to Tex. Her goal is to make ANY Envoy trained person into their own hostage rescue unit, using whatever resources are at hand. I think she just proved herself, today."

"I hate to admit it, but you're right," Muriel sighed. "Both of you. That was the slickest and cleanest action I've seen."

"But you're still angry."

"Yep. She left me out. From what you're saying," Muriel said, "everybody but ME knew about it. I'd have helped her. Made sure the resources were available for her. And the rest of the kids."

"Then you miss the whole point to the reason she did it the way she did," Bobby said. "You're the leader. She doesn't want to challenge you. She wants to be as good as you in her own way. She wanted to prove to you that she was worthy of you and all you've done for ALL of us. She couldn't tell you before because, if it hadn't worked out, she'd have felt stupid for trying. This was her graduation. She's shown that her methods work. Can you give her that?"

"You don't make this easy on a girl, you know," Muriel growled. "OK. I'll tell her. In fact, maybe I can do better than that. Let me see if I can get hold of that reporter." She went back to her office and made a phone call, then turned to Mata. "I'll be out of the office for a bit," she said.

"I'm coming, too. Need a squad?" asked Mata.

"I doubt it. I'm just going to show a reporter how the record of Marcia's hostage take-down was made. I just talked to him, and he's anxious to know," Muriel said.

"A reporter, huh? DEFINITELY a squad, then."

"Nope. I can think of better, if they'll do it," Muriel said, and called the five that had had professions for a while. When they came in, she explained the situation, and asked if they'd like to take a jaunt with her. The response was unanimous – they were coming. And in formal wear. Fran surprised her by coming up with something that seemed to blend the formal wear that Muriel and the rest wore with the white uniform that she wore as a doctor.

They translated to a conference room that Muriel had had occasion to be in before. And the reporter, was there with a camera man. He looked a bit nervous.

"Hi, Stan" Muriel said. "So, you want to know why the time ticks seemed impossible. We'll get to that in a minute. First, let me introduce who I brought with me. This is Don. He's a teacher and the best trainer in Envoy techniques that I've got. Next is Bobby, a certified counselor. Fran is our doctor, and yes, she and Bobby are both licensed to practice. Carla is an architect and engineer, and licensed in both. She's also a designer – interior, clothing, just about anything you want designed. Jeff is an engineer and computer programmer and computer designer. And licensed, of course. Tommy isn't with us. He's our philosopher, but right now he's filling out Marcia's gang of four – um, not to be confused by another gang of four, years ago. Tommy opted to join her because, well, to be honest, philosophy just doesn't pay anything."

"And who is this young lady. She doesn't seem to be dressed as fancy as you are," he asked.

"I'm Mata, Muriel's security chief. I'm an Envoy, not a human. And I can call her squads and have them here very quickly, as befits an Ambassador and the Leader of Home. I was the one that started Muriel's training, four years ago. And before you ask, I only started. SHE completed it."

"Now, as to the time ticks," Muriel said, and translated them all to the front of the building. "As you can see, it doesn't take someone with the training any time to go from one place to another." She translated them back to the conference room and continued, "That's why the time ticks didn't show any gaps for travel. And now you know." She paused for a moment, then pulled a DVD out of a 'no pocket' and handed it to him. "As for how the record was made. Here's the one of this meeting, starting from my calling my friends in Enclave, and ending just after I said, 'And now you know'. Put it in a computer and verify it for yourself. This was a technique that one of my squad members taught us a couple of months after I'd first been trained. She hadn't realized that we didn't know how to make the records. Now, everyone that's trained knows how to do it. So, does that answer all your questions?"

"Oh, my gosh! I should say so!"

"There's one more thing I'd like to add. I knew NOTHING about Marcia and the others training to be Hostage Rescue, and certainly not that she was training with Navy Seals. Marcia's just proved herself, though she never needed to prove herself to me. She's shown that Envoy trained humans can accomplish what seems to be impossible, and can do it with a minimum of fuss, and no mess or loss of life. And I'm proud of her, and all of them that took this training," Muriel said. "And I would hope that you would let me know when this airs, so she can see and hear me publicly acknowledge that."

"You've got it. Six o'clock news. And I'll pull some strings to have the whole interview put in, if you don't mind."

"I'd appreciate it," Muriel said. "Thanks. Now, I should get these friends of mine back to Enclave, so they can get back to their REAL jobs." And she translated the group back to her office.

"Well, Don? Bobby? Do you think that will work?"

"I'd think so," Don said.

"Definitely," Bobby echoed. "And a public acknowledgement like that. She'll be walking tall for the next month."

"Good. We'll just have to make sure she sees it," Muriel said.

"We'll make sure of it. And we'll make sure that you're down here with her," said Bobby.

"So, you're telling me that they really aren't going to be FBI and Secret Service?" asked Muriel.

"I doubt it. I imagine that they'll do the same thing you do – contract with the government to go in and deal, where otherwise it would mean injuries or loss of life. Like I said, the elite of the elite," Bobby said. "She'd take the high profile jobs. Not because they're high profile, as such, but because her taking them would make them high profile."

"Excuse me, miss. I'm looking for Ambassador Muriel?" a man asked.

"You found her. I'm Muriel."

"Um . . . my friend and I just got leave, and thought we should come out and talk to you. We may have done something wrong," he said.

"You're Seals?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Just Muriel. I'm too young to be a ma'am," she said, grinning. "Sit. Coffee?"

"If it's not too much trouble," he replied, then goggled as she created the mug and coffee right in front of him. "OK," he said, "I can see we have a few more things to learn."

"Did you catch the news? Your students just put the FBI Hostage Rescue team out of business," Muriel said.

"Yea, we saw. That's why I asked the commander for the time off. I wanted to apologize for overstepping our bounds," he said.

"You didn't. Did she show you how to create that view of the house and where everyone was?"

"No. That must have been after we had to go back to work."

"Don?" Muriel asked.

"No sweat. You know how you create an image of where you want to go, when you translate, then let reality take over the image, so you can check around to see that you won't conflict with somebody or something? Well it's like that, but you project it by turning it into shields. I use it to create historic scenes for kids, based on what I know about the times. Marcia used it to create where the gang needed to go, and what they needed to do. No surprises that way, and everybody knew what was needed and who did what," Don said.

"But, how did she know what was in the house, and where the bad guys were?"

"Simple. She, or someone in the group, walked by the front of the house, and got the shape of it and where the windows were. Then they went back and just created that, and looked through the windows," Don said, and the Seal started laughing.

"OK, NOW I see why you people are the best. You don't just think outside the box, you think outside the galaxy," he said. "That's going to take some practice for us to do, though."

"So, practice. See the building across the street?" Muriel said. "The one with the

green banner on it? Build that image and project it in front of you as miniature shields. Then mentally walk through the door, and let the reality update the miniature.”

“Oh, geez! I can see where everybody is and what they're doing. I can even turn it around to see what they're working on. What is that place?” he asked.

“Envoy Enclave Enterprises, or Triple E. It's a holding company that runs a whole bunch of companies and banks. Now you know how it's done.”

“Yea. The hardest part of the job was knowing where we were going and what we'd be facing. With this, we don't have to wait for blueprints and guess where the bad guys are. THIS is going to make a difference.”

“For more complex buildings, get a bunch of you all feeding the image at the same time, each from a different area,” Don said. “That's how I build the scenes I use. I have my squad help by each building on different areas and peoples. Working with reality is easier, but it can still help to have more people adding in their parts.”

“I can see that. Hard to keep it all in mind for just one person. Can it work from a photograph?” the Seal asked.

“Can you translate to a place from just a photograph?” Don responded.

“Huh. Yea. From the photo, let reality take over. Dang. We can be anyplace, and know what the problem is, and how to solve it, pop in and back out, and it's done,” he said.

“Now, you ARE going to share this with other teams, aren't you?” asked Muriel.

“Are you kidding? A life saver like this? You better believe it!” the Seal said. “You know, there really isn't the competition that people think there is between the teams. We do share ideas, and even bring in outsiders to train with us, as long as they can meet the standards. That's tough, with the Seals, but there are outfits that at least come close enough that we can work with them. I couldn't believe your friends meeting the standards. But we even took them on underwater stuff, and they showed us tricks that we now use. How did they get fit so fast?”

“Mind over matter. Your mind can shape your body, help muscles grow, cure diseases, things like that. It's on a cellular level, and Fran would know more about it than I do. I know just enough to keep from getting sick,” Muriel said. “You just have to be careful not to make changes that can cause you more trouble than good. Didn't your trainer teach you how to strengthen your body?”

“Well, kinda. But not the way your friends did it.”

“They simply took it to an extreme. I'd say they wanted to pass your tests legitimately, so they'd know their limits. In real life, they'd cheat,” Muriel said, smiling.

“Huh. Never thought of that. Good attitude. I know I like your friends. Always trying. Always coming up with something new that's useful. And everything they came up with, they taught us, with the idea that we'd pass it on. And we did. Four squads, now, and they're passing it on. The instructors are baffled by where we came up with the ideas, but I think that little mission, this morning, will convince them that we came by it dishonestly,” he said, laughing.

“Well, I don't know if anyone told you, but you're welcome to stay here, in the Guest House. The rights of a trainee, and more so because you're a successful one. And I'm sure that the prices charged to you for food and entertainment will please you, since there isn't one. And Marcia and her crew should be back round four.”

“You do know how to get a man's attention. No, no one told me about Guest House. You mean that ALL trainees have that opportunity?”

“Of course. You're Citizens of Home. The only ones that get that sort of treatment that AREN'T Citizens of Home are either employees of Enclave or guests,” Muriel said. “Why don't I take you over to Guest House and get you set up. Then you can see the sights for a while until Marcia gets here.”

Chapter 33

Aftermath

(Thursday afternoon, later)

"Marcia, I've pulled some outrageous stunts, as you know. But that topped them. You managed that in so matter-of-fact a way that you had people wondering how you did it. I've already had to field a news reporter and one of your trainers. He should be here in a minute," Muriel said.

"Oh, him. Yea, we didn't figure out how to work out floor plans and locations until after he was through with us," she said.

"Well, we told him. Don was in the office and recognized what you did, and I had an idea of how you got the original view of the building. So no sweat. So, how DID you get the initial view of the building? I know you couldn't see it from where you set up," Muriel said.

"That," she snorted. "We cheated. Tommy did a walk-by in casual clothes, to give us ground level, and we started with that. But we also had all our squads up in stealth to give us a view of the rest of the building and grounds. So, we just took it like a translation image which, in a sense, it was. And the four of us mentally walked our way in, locating the victim and the people that were holding her. After that, the pickup was easy."

"Were you nervous, at all?"

"Nope. Not until afterwards. We'd practiced so hard that we just did it," Marcia said. "Afterwards, however, we couldn't believe how slick it went. No guns, no property damage from us, almost everything went like clock-work. The only glitch was that Sammy – oops, sorry. Samantha – had trouble finding all the weapons on her target. The guy had some serious confidence issues. Along with the rifle, he had two pistols, six knives, piano wire with handles, and a set of brass knuckles. That's what the pause was before we translated back. She had to do three sweeps of the guy to make sure she got everything."

"Well, you did good. And I'm jealous. Like I said, I've done some outrageous things, but I never thought of UNDER-stating something like that," Muriel said. "You're later getting back than I thought . . ."

"Oh, sorry. Our Shepherd wanted to debrief us. By the way, he was impressed, too. And he insisted on debriefing ALL of us, and that took time. And you're stalling for some reason."

"Yep. I am. Your little escapade made the news. They played your record. And the reporter couldn't understand how you managed to do it, and why the time ticks didn't show any travel time. Can I ask you a question?" asked Muriel

"Sure!" Marcia said.

"Do you feel that I let you down, or didn't pay you enough attention, or something?"

"Nope. Nothing like that. Oh . . . you want to know why I didn't tell you what I was doing or ask for help. I couldn't. I felt it was something that I had to do for myself. Muriel, you've always been there for us, and shared whatever you had going. I just . . . I couldn't ask you to do this for me. I had to prove to myself that I could do it. It took longer than it might have with you. But it's something that I did, not something that was given to me. Do you understand?" Marcia asked.

"Yep. Oh, I'll admit that, at first, I was hurt and angry. But Don and Bobby set me straight. And that's why I've been stalling. Let's go to the break room, and you'll see why." she said, getting up and moving in that direction. Marcia, puzzled, followed her, and the rest followed Marcia.

As they sat down, Muriel said, "The first I knew about what you were doing was when Don shouted, 'Go Marcia'. Needless to say, that attracted my attention, and I was just in time to see the record you gave him of your mission. And I was impressed. You had it all so organized! Can I ask? How did the rest of the kids get involved?"

"You know what you say about leading?" Marcia said. "It really IS like that. I was going in a direction, and the rest just decided to follow me. Chase me, in some cases. There was a little bit of friendly competition. But really, we all just shared what we'd learned and pushed harder to get to where we were this morning. And I learned a lot from you – listen to others as well as yourself, because others have good ideas, too."

" . . . and now for something completely different. Earlier, today, I showed you a remarkable record of a hostage rescue. For those of you that missed it, I'm going to run it again. But then, I'm going to show you the answers to questions that I had when this first aired."

"My gosh! It all looks so matter-of-fact," Marcia said.

"Yea. And I know the thoughts were flying like crazy. I've been there," Muriel replied.

"Oh, they were. They definitely were. We were trying to cover all the contingencies. We finally decided to just throw shields on everyone, constricting them until we could get in and neutralize the situation and pull them out."

"And now, here's the rest of the story. Ambassador Muriel heard my questions, and was gracious enough to grant me an interview. And here's that interview from HER point of view."

Marcia watched and listened, quietly as the interview unfolded, from the prep of getting her other friends through all the answers. She nodded, occasionally, at the points Muriel made. And she smiled at the shocked look on the reporter's face when he experienced his

first translation, and realized why there was no travel time in the time ticks of the original record. Muriel definitely had a way of showing people exactly WHY Envoy training made a difference. And then it came. The point of view switched from Muriel to that of the camera man.

"There's one more thing I'd like to add. I knew NOTHING about Marcia and the others training to be Hostage Rescue, and certainly not that she was training with Navy Seals. Marcia's just proved herself, though she never needed to to me. She's shown that Envoy trained humans can accomplish what seems to be impossible, and can do it with a minimum of fuss, and no mess or loss of life. And I'm proud of her, and all of them that took this training," Muriel said. "And I would hope that you would let me know when this airs, so she can see and hear me publicly acknowledge that."

And that did it. Tears appeared in Marcia's eyes, and suddenly Muriel's arms were filled with her friend. Muriel let it go for a while, then said, "Did you really doubt that I'd be proud of you?"

"I didn't know. I just knew I had to try."

"Girl, if you'd asked, I'd have gotten a whole squad of Seals to train you and our friends. Or British SAS, or anything. I understand that you want to take this international," Muriel said.

"Yea. You've ALWAYS said that you didn't support an individual country, but could be called on by anyone in an emergency. And at first, I didn't understand," Marcia said. "Now I do. What's important isn't nations, but people. I know that now. And you know? It's like a drug. Once you've actually DONE it, saved somebody from a bad situation, you feel that you have to do it again and again."

"Yea. Teaching is the same way," Muriel said. "So is medicine and counseling. In fact, I think the key is anything that helps people. And different people try to do it in different ways. So, what's with the group that went to Secret Service?"

"Oh, them. They'll come back in. We divided up just to improve our chances of getting a way of showing the world what we could do. The internships are effectively over. And BOTH teams have been debriefed, and passed our techniques on to the two services. That's why they're late getting back," Marcia said. "You've got a high performance hostage rescue team, now, that can do other things, too."

"No, I don't," Muriel said.

"Huh?"

"Marcia, you're an Ambassador. So are the rest of our friends. All of them. But you've been chosen by them to be the leader. It's up to you what actions you take, and when," Muriel said.

“ME! I'm no leader.”

“Sure you are. You said it yourself. You're the leader because everybody else is following you,” Muriel said. “You've got the ideas. You've got the judgment to know what's needed. You've got the intelligence to know that you DON'T have all the answers – that other people can contribute. Look,” Muriel said, “it's not so tough, really. You'll feel yourself through it, just as I did. And you're NOT alone. You can talk with me. You can talk with Ted – he really isn't scary, you know. You can talk to any of our friends, or any of the many other Ambassadors we've got around the world. But when it comes to a job that you've decided to take, it's still your decision. There's nothing we can't do when we want to or have to.”

“So, you're throwing me to the wolves?” asked Marcia.

“Nope. I may be aiming you at them, but it's up to you whether or not you engage them. And I'm here to help, to advise, to back you up any way I can. Not just you, but all of you. You're still my friends, and I WANT you to succeed. Even if you surpass me. No pressure. Just friendship.”

Marcia thought about it. Then thought about the interview she just watched. And the fact that Muriel had backed ALL the friends in whatever they wanted to do. “Yea. You didn't throw me to the wolves. I did.”

“I prefer to think of it as 'you proved yourself on you OWN terms, and without help'. And you did, really. You know, a man by the name of Tom Clancy wrote a book, part of a series, about an elite group that was multinational and only acted with the approval of the governments where the action was taking place. You've actually created such a group, and you do it without the bloodshed and military style action. I'd be happy to help you 'sell' it to the other governments,” Muriel said. “That's if you want me to.”

“Are we going to need arrest authority in other nations?” asked Marcia.

“Nope. When you get called in, it's to solve a problem. Just like today, you bring them ALL out, and let the governments take it from there,” Muriel replied.

“Envoys?”

“Whenever you need them. Oh, uniforms. Get with Carla. You're a distinct group. You deserve to wear what you want,” Muriel said.

“What if we want to wear the fighting Class 'A' uniform we have now?”

“Like I said. What ever YOU want. It's YOUR decision. I'm just telling you that you don't HAVE to wear the American Enclave uniform.”

“Hmm. I may make a change, then, if you don't mind,” Marcia said.

“I don't mind. Look, Fran's in whites. And they differ from the American Enclave

uniform. Because she doesn't just serve us, but anybody she needs to serve," Muriel said. "Just one thing . . . why the physical buildup?"

"Oh, that. The Seals wouldn't believe I was serious unless I could do the things THEY did, WITHOUT using Envoy techniques. So, I talked to Fran, and we started a course of exercises. Two weeks later, I not only proved that I could, I picked up the Seal and dumped him in the drink."

"Oh, you DIDN'T"

"Yep," Marcia said. "And he wasn't dressed for it. He came up sputtering and laughing. I'd not only picked him up, I'd held him over my head and RUN into the surf. That was after a full grueling run of tests, too. He told me, later, that NONE of his students had ever had the temerity to try something like that, and that it proved to him that I was deadly serious. The other kids worked just as hard on their physical bodies, though they didn't do THAT to him. And he was impressed with their dedication. Speaking of which, I need to talk to him about that, and show him how to build up a body without destroying it."

"Then, you'll be happy to know that I've been sitting behind you through the interview," the Seal trainer said from behind her.

Marcia spun around in her chair. "YOU! You FINK! Don't you know you aren't supposed to listen in on girl's conversations?" And he laughed.

"I just wanted to tell you how proud you made me," he said. "Then Muriel told me about the interview. So I made it a point to be here. I get the feeling she's proud of you, too. And I'll accept any small crumbs of information you deign to give me."

"Such big words for a Navy Seal. Anyone would think you were literate," Marcia said. "You'll ruin your image."

"I think our reputation is safe with you," he said, grinning. "But I have something for you," he said, and handed her a small box. Inside was the Seal Team's 'Budweiser badge'. "I went back and talked to the commander and he agreed to let me give these to you. I don't expect that you'll actually wear it. But you deserve it. You passed the tests, as civilians – as CHILDREN. And girls as well as guys. I've got one for each of your crew, along with my congratulations on a job well done."

"Wow! OK, three of them are here with me. I'll see if I can get the other four," Marcia said.

"We're here," a teen in gray said. "Our Shepherd finally let us free. You guys really stirred up a hornet's nest. We even had to explain to Melanie what we'd done in training. And yes, we gave her the intelligence dump that you prepared, but expect more questions from her."

"So, let's go to my casual area, and you can hand them all out," Muriel said.

Marcia and her troops immediately translated in and waited for Muriel and the Seal trainer to make their prosaic way in on foot. There, the man handed out the Seal Team badges and congratulated each of them. He noted that each of the badges was engraved on the back with their name, and that a certificate of 'honorary Seal' came with it.

"Now, I have it on authority from the commander that you CAN wear the badges. You earned them, even though you're civilians and underage to even join the service," he said. "But you've given us tools that will make our jobs easier, and proven that they work." As he was talking, Melanie and Henry translated into the office.

"Well . . . so we see the man that corrupted these poor, defenseless children," Melanie said. "We'll top it. Our bosses have 'requested' that we provide you with identification and the authority to use it. Regardless of you age or the length of time you worked with us, you've earned our respect and appreciation. So, each of you will be getting both Secret Service and FBI identification. And you can use them. You kids are smart enough to know which one would be appropriate for what situation."

"I just want to add," Henry said, "that it scared me that you were interns for FBI and Secret Service. I thought it was going to be too much for you, and I didn't want to be involved in what I saw as your downfall. I was wrong. You kids, at sixteen, have shown more maturity and professionalism than many of our regular officers. You've set a new standard, and should be proud of that accomplishment."

"Oh, my," Marcia said. "No, we won't use them. But it's nice to have them. Thanks Melanie. Thanks Henry. What you said means a lot to me. To all of us. Thanks."

"Let's go get some supper, guys, and we can ALL calm down from the day," Muriel said.

Chapter 34

Justice
(Friday morning)

"Ameera! Hi! What can I do for you?" Muriel ask as the young student and Ambassador came into her office.

"I just thought I'd tell you how things are going. I've been asked to set up an Enclave in Tehran," she replied, sitting down. "Architecture isn't the problem. We'll stick to what people know in Iran. But I was wondering what I would need inside there."

"Well . . . off hand, your office, a Guest House and Visitors hotel, Reception, and Medical facilities. Mmm, oh! Lawyers offices if you're dealing with a government, and a branch of Triple E, and a maintenance section and power converter to run it. After that, whatever you feel would be 'something different' for the population to see. I take it that there's a government, now?" asked Muriel.

"Yes, though it's still shaky," Ameera said. "I've managed to push through that the entire Enclave is my Embassy, and that home rules apply inside it. Sixty percent of the population is trained, now, and that's what put together the government. I still haven't located where I'd like to put the Enclave. The government would like it inside the city, but that would mean displacing a large number of people. And how do I pay for it?"

"As for paying for it, talk to Ted. And you don't have to put it right in the city if you don't want to. DON'T let the government give you the land. Buy it. That makes it Home property, run by you, and therefore private property. That puts more teeth into the idea of it being YOUR home and not subject to government regulation," Muriel said. "What about the military and the scientists?"

"The scientists were never the problem . . . other than the fact that they were under the control of the old government and the military. In fact, they were the reason that the nuclear program moved so slowly and had so many bugs. Likewise the missiles. Which reminds me, they removed the old shield and put up a new one. People and communications can now get in, unless they're radical Shi'ite. And any radical Shi'ite in Iran can leave, but not come back," Ameera said.

"And the military?"

"Dead. Not by me. In fact, I didn't even know about it until afterward. The government went in and held mass trials, and executed anyone above the rank of lieutenant. Then they put their own people in charge and started sorting out who was trustworthy and who wasn't. That resulted in a number of other executions. It appears that most of the military had radical leanings, and were plotting to retake the country and government," Ameera said. "They wouldn't pledge to honor the new constitution."

"Iran has a new one?"

"Yes. And one of the first tenets of the constitution is that religious beliefs are not allowed in governmental affairs, and in all things the government ranks above any religious beliefs. Since all the government is Envoy trained, there's no way anyone can slide something in. To try is to commit treason," Ameera added. "There are other rights, too. Women now have the right to work at whatever they're qualified to do, and they can vote, subject to the same restrictions as the men. They HAVE to be trained. Religious clerics have to be licensed by the government, too. Any trying to preach without a license have the choice of getting a license or leaving the country."

"Licensing religious leaders? How does that work?" asked Muriel.

"Basically, it's a series of psychological tests to ensure that sociopaths and radicals are not allowed to preach," Ameera said. "I've checked it. They're not playing games with it. The tests are as valid as they can be. I asked one of my squads to check them for possible influences. But that's only part of it. Since they're administered by those with Envoy training, they can pretty much tell who will pass and who won't. The ones that don't pass, refuse to learn and refuse to leave the country are taken to Home. Most don't come back."

"Ouch! Doesn't that cause a problem with those taking them Home?"

"Nope. They've all had Caleb's training. And yes, he knows about it. The ones that DO come back have done half our work for us – they talked to other Shia clerics and told them what to expect. They left," Ameera said. "Now, it's mostly just the Shia population that's the problem. Every once in a while someone sets them self up as a rogue cleric, and has to be shown the error of his ways. But the worst is the Shia men that try to harass the rest of the population, especially the women. The police are weeding them out, though."

"Who changed the shield on the country?" asked Muriel.

"The government. They put up their shield on the surface of the one you had erected, then asked me to take down the one you put up. I checked theirs, first. Made a couple of suggestions that they accepted, gladly, then I took down the first one. It's working," Ameera said. "Business is back to being international, and food is coming into the country. But radicals from Pakistan and Afghanistan are NOT getting in. Things are quieting down, buildings are being rebuilt – no sense in repairing them as the rebuilding is done with Envoy techniques. They're even accepting tourists."

"Sounds like it's coming along, then. What about the University?" asked Muriel.

"That's a bit of a problem. We lost a number of professors in the purge. And somebody destroyed the women's dorm. At one point I even considered taking over the grounds of the University for the Enclave," she said.

"Why'd you reject it?" asked Muriel.

"Iran really needs a University. Education is very valuable. We need more schools, not less,"

"So? There is the University of Home. Dorms aren't necessary, though one or two might be helpful," Muriel said. "Courses are simply dumped on trained students, and they go from there, so there really isn't any need for large dorms. There are very few courses that require more than that. Just enough to take care of the students for a day or so."

"OK, but you're talking about Envoy style courses. What about normal human courses," asked Ameera.

"We have them. For a great many disciplines. BUT . . . they still require the mental link to take them. If you're talking about the traditional method of learning, then forget it. If what you want are affordable courses that put an individual into a productive field quickly, then you want the Envoy style courses," Muriel said.

"So, who do I have to talk to about them?"

"Two people," Muriel said. "And you've already talked to one. The other one you've met before – Betty."

"You rang, oh great Chancellor of the University of Home," Betty said, walking into the casual area. And Ameera started laughing.

"You're KIDDING! But . . .," Ameera started.

"I was named Chancellor four years ago. I still think Ted did it in a fit of pique. However, I don't really do anything," Muriel said.

"You can say that again," Betty interjected. "She just lords it over us working peons, waving her hand like a queen and saying, 'make it so'."

"Quiet, you, or I'll make you do ALL the work."

"Too late. I already do," Betty replied. "Seriously, Ameera, here's a nice glossy brochure that lists all the courses. You notice that we don't list the degree offered. That's because there's only one level – PhD. You also notice that there's no prices listed. That's because they all require Envoy training, and anyone with Envoy training gets their education free. And, just as an added bonus, that includes room and board, medical attention when they find out our astronomical prices, and entertainment – watching OTHER people have their heart attack over our prices." By this time Ameera was laughing so hard that she had trouble catching her breath.

When Ameera managed to regain control of herself, Muriel added, "We're accredited in at least a dozen countries, including America. Mostly, because we showed that the courses we offer are effective. Betty and her squad have done a phenomenal job of putting them

together.”

“With the help of a team in Home,” Betty added. “Let's not make me out to be more than I am. A LOT of the work was done in Home and passed back to me.”

“Come on, Betty. Here I am trying to build you up, and you toss it off? What kind of a leader ARE you,” Muriel said.

“An honest one,” Betty replied. “Unlike some teenage monsters I know.”

“Oh, no! Please! Don't get started again. I don't think my stomach could handle it,” Ameera said.

“Well, in any case, where ever you set up your Enclave, this might be a purpose for it. At least at first,” Muriel said. “And you know we'll help you set it up, if you want. We've done it in various ways in various countries. But in your case, setting it up as a school, I think, would be the best way.”

“Muriel,” Ameera said, “there's one thing that bothers me, though. Socialization is an important part of college life. Getting to know people. How they behave, and react to things. What their personalities are like.”

“OK,” Betty said. “I hear you. OK, double the volume of the dorms, and give them a little 'physical' education. We have a game we play that is fast and wicked. We call it 'air hockey' but it really has more to do with soccer than hockey. One hundred to one hundred fifty miles per hour, fifty feet off the ground. And that ball does nasty things in the air as it's pushed around by shields.”

“Oh, that,” Muriel said. “I'll guarantee you that after two days of that you will definitely know your team mates. Two more days and you'll know your opponents, too. Especially if it's just played for fun. No grudge matches. And even more so if you change up team compositions, so you're working with everyone, sooner or later. And I bet there are other ways it can be done.”

“But, what would the women do?” asked Ameera.

“We play with mixed teams. After all, there's no locker-room problems. You're always just a thought away from a hot shower,” Muriel said. “My friends are a mix of boys and girls, and we've been playing with each other since before we were twelve. Um . . . let me rephrase that. We've been playing games against each other for that long. And since we were twelve, we've played this 'air hockey'. The reason it's so good at getting to know people is because of the group mind effect.”

“I'll second that,” Marcia said. She'd just walked through the doors as Muriel had been talking about 'air hockey', and was waiting for a break in the conversation. “Group mind is how my team is able to pull off hostage rescues without any injuries to ANYBODY. We each know what our job is, what the team members jobs are, and where everybody is and what

they're doing without having to think about it. If someone needs help, we ALL know it, and know who will be going to assist. It just works. Muriel," she added, "can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Ameera, do you mind?" asked Muriel.

"Nope. Is it private? Do I need to leave for a bit?" Ameera returned.

"Naw, nothing like that. In fact, this might interest you. Henry just sent me a message that they've had a request to extract a woman from a religious community. The kicker is that the woman is over 21, and the community is saying that she came in voluntarily. Her family is saying that she was kidnapped and brainwashed," Marcia said.

"Hmm. Henry," Muriel said and sent, "what gives. You know over twenty one you have to be able to prove kidnapping."

"I know," he said when he translated in. "Her car was found, abandoned and still running ten months ago. Her parents and boyfriend all claim that this group had been after her for a long time. Credit cards were all tapped from the location of the community or its surrounding area right after she disappeared. And the community will not allow us to contact the woman to find out if it really was voluntary. Her parents say the woman was dead set against the community and its ideals, and would not have voluntarily gone with them, or even donated money, much less tap all her cards to the max in one day."

"Henry, are you authorizing the action?"

"Yea, the boss says it's suspicious enough to bring her in. Is there any way to confirm one way or the other if we do?" he asked.

"Yes. We can pull the record from her mind," Muriel said. "It's messy, but it can be done."

"Then yes, I'm authorizing it. I'll sign anything you need to allow it," he said.

"You'll sign with Marcia," Muriel said. "She's her own team leader. Oh, I'll check it, but it will be a contract with Marcia to bring her in. Marcia, do you know how to pull a record from somebody? Particularly someone that's unwilling to cooperate?"

"Yea. I got that. One of my Envoys showed me. You're right, it's messy. Especially in a brainwashing situation. But I can do it," Marcia said.

"Henry, let's see the contract. It's not that I doubt you. I just want my friend's tail covered."

"I AM wearing pants, Muriel."

"That's better than wearing stripes," Muriel replied with a grin, alluding to the 'classic'

prison costume. Henry grinned and shook his head at the interplay and handed Muriel the contract. Muriel read it then handed it to Marcia to read.

“Doesn't look like any 'gotchas' Muriel,” Marcia said.

“Yep. That's the way I read it, too. OK, since there's nothing in the contract about interrogation, dump the record extraction method on Henry, and let the FBI handle that side of it. And as soon as you've both signed and exchanged copies, go fetch,” Muriel said, smiling.

Marcia and Henry exchanged documents, signing each, then each put them in a 'no pocket'. “Henry, get back to headquarters. We'll drop the victim off, there and get a receipt.”

“You won't stick around for the interrogation?”

“Nope. There shouldn't be any hint that it was us that did it instead of you,” Marcia said. “Unless you want to write up another contract, that is.”

“I may. OK, I'll see you there, then. If I can, I'll have a contract ready for you,” he said, and disappeared.

“Muriel, we already have the image and approximate location, and my team has isolated the exact location and is just waiting for me to give the word. They'll slap shields on everyone, and we'll go in and pick her up – translate directly to FBI headquarters, and see what Henry can cough up. If we're not back in five minutes, you'll know that I got another contract.”

“Good enough. I'd like to know the results, if you don't mind,” Muriel said.

“When have I ever kept anything from you?”

“Well, there was that boy”

“I mean in the line of duty.”

“Uh, huh. What ever you say. I'd STILL like to know what you were doing with him.”

“Dream on, Mureil. A girl's got to have SOME secrets.”

And from the back of the room, a female voice called out, “Good luck with that.”

Chapter 35

Vengeance?
(Friday afternoon)

"Muriel, I begin to understand why you are sometimes rather acerbic," Marcia said, as she came into Muriel's office. "I gave Henry the dump on how to get a record from another person's mind. He thought it over, and wrote me a new contract for interrogation. And I've got to tell you, that method of getting a record has got to be one of the dirtiest things I've ever done."

"Yea, it's not pretty. So, which was it? Voluntary or kidnapping?"

"No question. Kidnapping. And a few other things. As well as theft of money, theft of identification, abuse, sexual assault, and some techniques that rank right up there with torture, such as sleep deprivation. They wound that poor girl up so tight that she didn't even know who she was. Once I got the record, I requested permission to help restore her original personality and memories," Marcia said. "That's why I'm a little late getting back."

"No problem on time," Muriel said. "Have you had lunch?"

"No. Not yet. By the way, Henry wrote me a third contract after he saw the record. I had to call in not only the seven of us and our squads, but help from Home. We picked up the whole community. The leaders are being held on enough charges to keep them in jail for the next two hundred years. Henry's sorting through the rest to see who are active participants and who are victims. Their bank accounts have been frozen, and their assets seized," Marcia said. "This is one time when I wish slavery hadn't been outlawed. I think those people should be sold to pay off the debt they owe their victims."

"Whew! That's a bit strong."

"Yea, well you didn't see what they did to those people. And all in the name of 'religion'. Where do people get the idea that they can brainwash other people in the name of some mythical deity?" asked Marcia.

"That's what happens when you're a sociopathic individual who wants to control others and gain money and power without having to work for it. And it isn't just religion that's like that. Look at business. Heck, look at politics! The whole thing is a mess," Muriel said. "THAT'S why I get a bit sour at times. Thank goodness for my friends. People I can kid with and that have a healthier outlook on life. People I can talk to, and not be thought a kook."

"Well, I'll tell you how bad it was. Henry's already called the Federal Prosecutor and said, 'no plea bargain and no state's evidence'. He's not sure, yet, but he's looking into the possibility that some missing persons were actually abducted by these people and killed. If he can prove that . . . well . . . let's just say that it's a good thing that the death penalty isn't

common, and that public execution is right out!" Marcia said. "Expect that he'll end up here growling at you. And don't take it personally. He's upset, and personally, I can sympathize with his feelings."

"Marcia, is this too much for you?" asked Muriel.

"I don't know. I never really realized just how bad people could be, I guess."

"You know," Muriel said, "I'm not really a counselor. Bobby is, though. And you've always been able to talk to him. And believe it or not, he might REALLY understand."

"I've thought of that. And I may take that route. One thing is definite, though. I won't stop what I'm doing," Marcia said, grimly. "Somebody has to stop these people and make them pay for their crimes against the innocent."

"Um"

"No, Muriel. No private action. I may do some private hunting, but I won't take ANY action without proper authority to back it up. And even then, it'll be under the umbrella of Home. Our methods are not human methods, and we need that separation. It's why I told Melanie and Henry that I wouldn't use their identification. Our methods can't be restricted by the laws of this country," Marcia said. "Oh, I'm not going to go hog wild or anything. It's just that if I'd been restricted to FBI techniques, I'd never have been able to find out what those people had been doing to their victims."

"Understood."

"One other thing, Muriel. I DO accept the honor they gave us. We're underage and haven't gone through their training. Yet they saw fit to give us the identification and tell us we could use it. And that IS quite an honor. And I was glad you suggested the contract to Henry. I hadn't thought to. Let HIM explain to the judge that the techniques we use are authorized by the Federal government under contract."

"When you say you may do some private hunting . . . ?" Muriel prompted.

"There are others out there, and we may look into them as we find them," Marcia said. "But most of the information would be filtered back to Fred for his database. If we can find enough to present to Henry or Melanie that fits THEIR criteria, then we may 'suggest' something. But we wouldn't act without a contract approved by you."

"OK. I can live with that. In fact, you relieve my mind. It sounds like you've set yourself a good set of rules to operate under," Muriel said.

"Hey, I read Tom Clancy, too," Marcia said, grinning. "We're something outside the normal – something to be used when all else fails. And we're GOOD at what we do."

"Cocky?"

“Nope. I know our limitations. And I also know our abilities. If it's something that doesn't fit our abilities, we walk away,” Marcia replied. “We may build on our abilities, over time. YOU sure did. But, we're also conscious of the reputation of Home. We want this to work, which means we've got to be careful in what we choose and what we do. Muriel? Do you MIND working with us on this?”

“Nope. Honored to help however I can,” Muriel said.

“Good. You know, I never really realized why you were so gung-ho about limitations. It looks different when you're in the hot seat. Part of the challenge is making actions fit within the limitations of both your team and the 'rules of engagement' that are set. You've set the rules. The Team has set the personal limitations of the weakest person – which, I've got to say, are actually the limitations of all of us. We've had some workarounds, but not many. And mostly it's just shifting duties between people. But on the basic stuff, like we did this morning, that we can all do.”

“So, what ARE the limitations?”

“Oh, things like the basic imaging that Tommy did. All of us can image, of course. But the level of detail that he can come up with surpasses anything any of the rest of us can do. There's a couple that excel at taking what little information we have, and squeezing all the possibilities out of it, and choosing the one that is most likely. I'm learning, from them, how to do it,” Marcia said. “But it's going to be a long haul for me. And there's other things.”

“Well, that's what makes a team, is having people work together that have different skills and abilities.”

“True,” Marcia said. “Very true. And the job of a leader is finding them and using them to the best of THEIR ability.”

“So, why you? Obviously, they picked you to lead them. Why?” asked Muriel.

“Well, I started it, of course. I started doing some in-depth muscle building, and others asked why. So, when I told them, they asked if they could get involved. And as it went along, it just seemed that more and more they were looking to me,” Marcia said. “Muriel, do you remember when we kids started getting together?”

“Yea?” It was more a question than a statement.

“It was the same thing. But instead of you being the focus, it was me. And it was scary. And the more things went on, the more they looked to me for decisions. Oh, they'd make suggestions and we'd have discussions, but the end result was that what I decided was the way it went,” Marcia said. “Well, really, it was their decision, too. It was mutual. You know, Muriel, it wouldn't hurt you to do some exercise.”

“Are you trying to tell me that I'm getting fat?”

“Well”

“Uh, huh. OK, kid. Match. You call it,” Muriel said with a grin.

“No cheating. Purely physical?”

“Nope,” Muriel said. “No cheating. Envoys of your choice to referee.”

“Why do I smell a rat?” asked Marcia. “OK, but no swimming. Even after what I've been through for three years, I doubt that I could beat you in that.”

“I told you. Your choice. You call it.”

“Now, I REALLY smell a rat. What have you got up your sleeve?” asked Marcia.

“My arm. Come on, Marcia. You're the one that said I needed exercise. That's a challenge. I'm just taking you up on it,” Muriel said.

“I'm getting more and more suspicious all the time,” Marcia said. “What makes you so sure you'd win?”

“I'm not sure I'd win. I AM sure I'd surprise you,” Muriel said. “I started doing casual exercise shortly after we got here, simply because I realized that I was spending too much time just sitting. And eating. Chuck's meals are GOOD. As are the meals in any of the restaurants, here. Then I talked to Mark, and he did some research and came back with a course of exercise and Envoy style muscle training that wouldn't bulk me up, but would make it possible for me to increase my strength and stamina. That was improved on when I met the Marines that wanted training. And it's gone on from there. Taylor's 'Jolly Greens' gave me another outlook on exercise, and so did Chen and her brother. Anna contributed to the mix. And my swimming. ALWAYS my swimming. I've pushed my times up to world class over that time. I'm stronger and more flexible than you may realize. And have more stamina, too. NOT bulk strength. I'll never be a raving beauty, but in a bikini I can draw eyes – jealous ones from women, and you can imagine what kind of looks I get from men. Ask Tommy. Or Don, or Jeff, or even Ted if you can get a straight answer out of him.”

“What are you saying?”

“You can pick up a log with a bunch of friends, and run along a beach with it. I can pick up a twenty foot 'tree', vertically, and flip it end for end, so that the end I'm holding lands directly away from me,” Muriel said. “Look it up. It's called 'tossing the caber',” Muriel said.

“So, what you're saying is that you have strength AND control.”

“Yep,” Muriel said. “It isn't how strong I am, but how much I can control it. Which means that in some cases I have to be STRONGER than others. Precision counts. And, like you, I didn't do it all physically. I used Envoy techniques to improve muscle strength and

stamina and control as I went along.”

“Son of a gun! You've been holding out on me.”

“Not really,” Muriel said. “The subject just never came up. And it wasn't anything that I felt I had to 'suggest' to the rest of you. It was just something I did for me.”

“Does anyone else know?” asked Marcia.

“Not really. Other than Fran and Mark, and Mata, of course,” Muriel said. “Others have seen a difference in me, but it was so gradual that they really didn't make the connection. Just as I didn't realize the physical conditioning YOU'D been going through, because I didn't really notice over time.”

“And you really think you could take me in any contest.”

“Oh, I don't know. Wanna find out?” asked Muriel, innocently.

“Um . . . maybe not. I think I'll just let it be a mystery,” Marcia said, grinning. “After all, I've seen that look on your face, before. I think, instead, I'll just have a little talk with Taylor and Anna, and the Lady Chun.” Muriel snickered.

“Hmm. And I think I'll find out when you go swimming, and show up,” Marcia said. “And see for myself what you're hiding under your uniform. Speaking of uniforms, I talked to Carla. She suggested that, if I intended to work for Enclave, that I simply difference the color of the uniform. But that if I was going to break off from Enclave, she had an assortment of uniforms that I might like. So I talked to the troops. Would you have any problem with our working out of here, as an extension of Enclave?”

“Absolutely not!”

“Oh. OK, We'll find some . . . ,” Marcia started.

“No, no! I have absolutely no problem with you working out of here,” Muriel said. “It might mean MY calling on you, once in a while. But other than that, and whatever support we can offer, you'd be pretty much on your own. Free to take what jobs you felt were appropriate and documented.”

“OH! OK. Sorry, I mistook what you said,” Marcia said, relieved. “OK, so we can work out of here as independents, and still be available for whatever you need. Do you think there would be any conflicts?”

“Possible, but I doubt it. We're both after the same thing – protection of the innocents,” Muriel said. “I think the worst case scenario would be that we both felt we needed the other at the same time. And I think, with your speed, that that wouldn't be a problem. If worse comes to worse, we freeze one of the situations until we can clean up the other. So . . . ,” she added, “what happens now?”

"Swimming?" asked Marcia.

"Grudge match?"

"Nope. I just feel wrung out in some ways and over-energized in others. I need some activity to cool down and refocus," Marcia said.

"OK, let's go." They translated to the pool on the roof of Muriel's friends office building, and then switched to bathing suits.

And that's when the whistles started. Muriel hadn't been up to her friends recreation area for a couple of years. At least not in a bathing suit. Marcia preened. Muriel blushed. Marcia, looking at her friend's face, dove into the water. And a second later Muriel looked like a knife sliding gently into the water. But at a high rate of speed. A full body length behind Marcia, but closing without any trouble, despite all that Marcia put into her strokes.

This was an Olympic sized pool – it even had the lane markings in the bottom, but not the floats since this was used mainly for just cooling off and fooling around. It COULD be rigged for floats, and even racing blocks, but that was seldom done. However, Muriel didn't need either, it appeared, for she was already even with her friend and pulling ahead. Someone of a mystic nature might have said that the water loved Muriel. It certainly looked that way. Someone of a more technical nature would have said that she had a perfect form and powerful stroke. And that, too would be correct.

Don, simply said, "WOW!" and that seemed to sum it up nicely. He watched as she gained the end of the pool a full length ahead of Marcia, touched the wall and started back. He was ready for the touch, a stopwatch in his hand, and when Muriel returned to the start of the lane pressed it again and looked at it in wonder.

"No," Muriel said, "I'm not trying out for the Olympics. This was just a casual swim."

"Casual, my left foot," Don said. "I've seen Marcia swim, before. I've even timed her laps for her. You just blew away every time that she's ever made. You're not even breathing hard."

"Well, of course not," Muriel said. "I'm used to doing four hundred meter sprints."

Marcia, by this time, had finally returned to the start, exhausted and breathing hard. She simply looked at Muriel, shook her head, and said, "Never again. Wait a minute! Four hundred meter SPRINTS? Those aren't sprints, girl. That's eight lengths of the pool. You've got to teach me how you do that."

"What? Swimming? Oh, basically, its the same idea as mechanics. In an engine, if there's vibration or heat, there's likely a loss of efficiency. With swimming, it splash. The less you splash, the more efficient your strokes will be," Muriel said. "Betty has a dump on it. Ask her. And she's got all the upgrades I made to it. It's basically a simple idea, but complex to

perform well, unless you use Envoy techniques to train yourself. And once you hit a certain point, eight lengths is nothing. Just a morning swim. Besides, it's all free style – you know, Australian crawl.”

“You were using Envoy techniques?”

“Oh, no. Not in actual swimming. Only in training your body and establishing the muscle groups to make it work,” Muriel said. “I had Fran help me with the muscle group strengthening and training.”

“Well, anyway, it explains why the boys were whistling at you. But where did you train, if they hadn't seen you in a bathing suit before?”

“My roof. Jeff was kind enough to build a pool for me, like this one, on my roof. Then I shielded it for sound so that I wouldn't get the rest of the kids too curious,” Muriel said. “After all, a girl's got to have SOME secrets.” And they both laughed. “Honest, Marcia, there's no competition between us. The muscle training and swimming training took me a couple of years. But with your build, you should be able to do it in a couple of weeks. Then, you can go shock your Seal trainer.” And she grinned.

“Won't I just, though,” Marcia said. “I was the weakest in the group in swimming. He almost refused to train us further.”

“There's an additional benefit that I think you already know. Being fit, you feel better, and everything works better,” Muriel said. “As I understand it, it helps you think better, too. All I know is that when I'm frustrated, I take a break and go swimming. It helps.”

“Well,” Marcia said, “I found out what I wanted to know. And I'm still frustrated,” she said, grinning. “I thought for once I'd be able to teach YOU something. Once again, you beat me. Oh, well. I guess I'll take a break and go eat.”

“I'd like to join you, if you don't mind,” Muriel said. Marcia looked at her friend, then shrugged, grinned, and nodded.

Chapter 36

Interruption (Saturday morning)

::Muriel,:: Mata sent, ::I hate to wake you, but there's a delegation at the gate that wants to talk to you.::

::I'll be down in a minute. Bring them in.::

::They refuse to come in,:: Mata sent back.

“What? Why?” asked Muriel, translating in in front of Mata's desk.

“They didn't say. Just that they couldn't come in. They've got some kind of headgear and beards, Muriel.”

“Hmm,” Muriel said. ::Marcia, can I borrow you and your troops?::

::Good morning, sleepy head. About time you got up. What's up?::

::I want a tracer on me. Possible confrontation, and if they try to grab me, I'll let them,:: Muriel said. ::I'm getting tired of getting little guys. I want to find out who the boss is.::

::You got it. Whenever you holler, we'll pick you up,:: Marcia said with a mental grin.

::You wish. It's not me you have to worry about. It's them,:: Muriel said, and mentally stuck out her tongue. She translated, then, to a spot a hundred yards from the main gate, and laughed. ::Marcia, you can call off the tracer. These people won't hurt me.::

::How do you know?::

And Muriel sent her an image of the group of men. ::They're Sikhs,:: she sent. ::A religious group that started in the Punjab area of India. They believe strongly in peace and knowledge. And I'll bet that the reason they 'can't' come in is because they're afraid that we'd try to 'convert' them. If you and your troops like, you could help show them around in a few minutes. Just show up in ones and twos, and casual.::

By this time Muriel was through the gate and facing the men. “Hello. My name is Muriel. You wanted to see me?”

“I am Daler. We have come to try to determine what you are,” one said.

“Well,” Muriel said, “to begin with, we are not a religion. We have no interest in converting people or having religious arguments. Discussions, however, are another matter.

Many of us are quite happy to learn more about the religions of humans. But your beliefs are safe. You can enter and meet us, freely and without fear. We hold no animosity toward your people."

"Hi, Muriel," Marcia said, coming up behind her. "What's up?"

"Marcia, I'd like you to meet Daler. Daler is a Sikh of some accomplishment who is considered competent to lead in some of their formal practices. Daler, Marcia is the head of our tactical search and rescue unit, and a friend of mine. If you feel at all concerned for your safety, she and her troops could show you around and serve as protection. Or, if you prefer, I could have a couple of my squads of Envoy serve in that capacity."

"So, you would have your troops lead us around so that we would only see what you wanted us to see?" asked Daler.

"No," said Muriel, smiling. "There are places in Enclave that could be dangerous. Alone, you might get hurt. With them, well, they can throw a shield around you that would stop a nuclear explosion, so that you could visit such places without fear of being injured. And in addition, they know where everything is, and can lead you to what interests you most. Honest, Daler, we have absolutely nothing to hide. I would like to know what you thought we were. Won't you and your friends come to my office, so we can discuss it?"

After a moment's hesitation, Daler nodded and they started for Muriel's office. "I had heard," he said, "that you weren't human."

"Well, that's a matter of opinion. But for practical purposes, Marcia and I are very human," Muriel said. "But some people that you will see and meet aren't. They're Envoys. They have no bodies, really. They just look and feel like they are human. But they can assume any shape they choose that suits the purpose of the moment. About like changing clothes. Maybe the best way to describe them is that they are intelligent power. And the techniques they have can be taught to humans. But only if the human wants to learn them."

"That's why you said that you don't want to convert people, and aren't a religion?" Daler asked.

"Exactly. I think just about everybody that I've talked to thought it was a religion. I have no idea why," Muriel said.

"But . . . your leader has attacked religions!" he said.

"Oh, dear. First, take a look at this," Muriel said, pulling her passport out of her 'no pocket' and handing it to him. He opened it, and stopped dead, stunned.

"YOU are the leader?" he exclaimed.

"Yep. Mostly because other people chase me because they like the way I'm going. Some chase me because they want to kill me. It wouldn't do them any good. There's others

that can do the job I do. Maybe even better,” Muriel said.

“Don't count on it,” Marcia interrupted. “Oh, eventually, they'd get it. But what you do goes beyond just teaching people techniques and sorting out problems. You have a knack.”

“Well, whether or not that's true, you've got one piece of information backward. We don't attack religions. We don't care what people think, for the most part. But we have been attacked by religions, and retaliated as needed,” Muriel said. “Two in particular we destroyed in the process of putting them down. Both of them were out to destroy us. One by attacking a friend of mine in a particularly nasty way. The second, much older religion, used lies to create fear of us, then called for our removal – either by sending us 'back where we came from' or killing us. They just wouldn't get it through their head that attacking us was not a good thing to do. However, it IS true that those that take the Envoy training lose their religious beliefs. Oh, not necessarily the ethical values that religions can teach. Just the religion, itself. It's why we only train people that WANT to learn.”

“But, does not religion come from god?” asked Daler.

“Nope,” said Muriel. “And we, who have been trained and gone to Home and faced our Judgment know this as fact, not belief. Religions were made by humans to comfort them, give them some rules to live by, and explain the unexplainable. Except that, in this day and age, many of those things CAN be explained. But the religions don't accept that as valid, because it goes against their teachings. And the rules they give people are outmoded and very often were wrong even when they were new. The end result of the training we give straightens THAT out. People with the training understand exactly what decisions need to be based on. Actually, the training we offer is just the basics, because how people apply that training varies as much as people do. All we teach is how to reach power, how to build shields, how to translate from one place to another instantly, and finally how to translate to Home. And it's that trip to Home that tends to eliminate religion in the lives of the trainees, and gives them the basis to make valid decisions.”

“Then, what you're saying is that what you believe in is a philosophy,” Daler said.

“Oh, don't let Tommy hear you say that,” Marcia said. “He actually became a 'professional philosopher', if there actually is such a thing. He studied a number of philosophies from all over the world, and religions, too. In fact, he'd be a good one to discuss religion with, as he can show exactly what the religions believe and why, and why they're wrong. But don't talk to him if you want to retain your religion. He can be rather blunt in stating what he knows. In any case, there's another place where you're wrong. It isn't what we believe. It's what we know for fact. Some people would call it a truth. Others would capitalize the word 'truth', but in human use I think that would be excessive. Individual humans have varied knowledge and experience, and therefore incomplete facts on which to base decisions.”

“You speak as if you were not human,” Daler said to Marcia.

“Nope. I'm human. I also have access to a much larger database of information than

ordinary humans because of my training,” she replied.

“How, a larger data base?”

Oh, I’ve had some courses from our trainers. Each course is equivalent to a PhD,” Marcia said. “And my trainers were nice enough to take into account the fact that some courses were contradictory, and either straighten out the contradiction or provide warning flags on the information so we’d KNOW when it was contradictory. Well, all those courses, for a normal human, would take years if not lifetimes to acquire. I got them over the course of about two weeks. That’s a LOT of information at my disposal. And all of my troops have done the same thing in their areas of interest. And that’s not counting the most recent batch of information we all got, the hard way, in our specialty. And that, just recently.”

“What is your specialty?” asked Daler.

“We’re Search and Rescue and Hostage Recovery,” Marcia replied. “We’ve combined information and training – procedures, if you will – from various police agencies with information from the Coast Guard and training by the Navy Seals. And, we’ve turned all of that into a course of its own that’s available to any Envoy trained people that can pass the physical side of it.”

“Now, THAT I didn’t know,” Muriel said. “You’ve turned it into a course?”

“Betty recommended it. She said that what we were doing was too valuable to just leave in the hands of a few. Even if the few were nearly invincible friends of the indomitable Muriel,” Marcia said with a grin.

“Goof. Brown noser,” Muriel grinned back.

“Slave driver. Bad influence,” Marcia grinned broader.

“Do any Envoys have the training?” asked Muriel.

“Not that I know of, but I wouldn’t put it past them,” Marcia replied. “Oh, part of our training you might not like. HumInt.”

“You’re talking about ‘boots on the ground’ spying, aren’t you,” Muriel made it a statement, not a question.

“Yep. And yes, Melanie has the information as a course. Why?”

“Because, we have a problem with Ameera, and we need to help her. You may have just given us a way to do it. Envoys, trained in this stuff, could go in and find out where the resistance pockets are, and either neutralize them or provide the information to eliminate them,” Muriel said.

“Hmm. It might have to be ‘eliminate them’,” Marcia said. “But, in any case, let her know

about the courses, and offer her the use of some Envoys from Home. Her people don't have the physical strength to handle it. Nor the gender, if my guess is right. She can have 'boots on the ground' about five minutes after she decides to use them."

"You don't mind?" asked Muriel.

"Nope. Melanie already has the course, and is pushing some of her people to meet the physical requirements – the Seal requirements," Marcia said.

"And Henry and Adam have the same," Tommy said, from the other side of Muriel. "CIA may not be able to operate in this country, but the FBI can, and have the intelligence to keep it to intelligence gathering. Oh, Anna and Taylor also have the information. Taylor's already enacted it with his Envoys, and is starting to push a company of his 'Jolly Greens'. Anna thanked me, but didn't indicate one way or the other whether she'd use it."

"What about Chun?" asked Muriel

"Oh, her. She grabbed the S&R side of it with both hands, and already has about a hundred people trained. They don't have the physical and HumInt side of it enacted, and they're modifying the S&R so that normally strong people can handle it. She said they'd pass that back when they get it perfected better," Tommy said. "It means using more Envoy techniques than physical strength, but I don't see anything wrong with that. Most of that is based on the Coast Guard training."

"So, you're making this available to other Ambassadors. What about other police agencies?" asked Muriel.

"Any that want it," Marcia said. "But, they have to ask through their Ambassadors. That gives us the control that, if we don't trust the police in the area or country, we can say 'no'. The key is that the Ambassadors know what departments have Envoy training. And that's an absolute to be able to take this training. And, coming from their own Ambassadors, it doesn't look like America is trying to dictate what other countries can do."

"You've got this pretty well worked out, haven't you?" asked Muriel. "Maybe you should take over my position, then."

"Not on your life! Look. Ted is administrative, and he's good at it. You're troubleshooting in general, and you're good at that. You're also good at training in basic Envoy techniques and a number of other things that really don't have a title, but just fall under one of those two," Marcia said. "Me? I'm a cop. Since dad died, that's all I've ever wanted to be. And when the rest of our friends found out that what I really meant was that I wanted to be a 'Super Cop', they joined in. They LIKED the action we had when we were younger. It's an adrenaline rush. It's also just a good feeling to get ordinary people out of a bad situation, and keep the peace. Nope. YOU keep the leadership. I'm not challenging you."

"You're sure?"

“Absolutely. Oh, I can train, sure. But the rest is mono-focused. Not like you, that can see generalized problems and come up with solutions. I’m a protector, yes. But you’re also a nurturer, and I’m not as much. And I think that’s the basic difference in us – in our outlooks and abilities,” Marcia said. “Nope, I’m happy letting you lead, and answering to you. Even there, I have a lot to learn. And I am learning. But YOU’RE the boss. And all this is going right over poor Daler’s head.”

“No, actually, it isn’t,” Daler said. “You’ve just told me more, in a few minutes, than I ever understood about Enclave. Muriel, you said that taking the training would stop us from being religious. Why?”

“Because, religion is made of people, and based on faith. The training takes you beyond both, and shows you what actually is,” she said. “And that conflicts with almost everything that can be counted as a religion. Oh, it doesn’t stop the good parts – the ethics of behavior. But there’s no longer a BELIEF in god, because you KNOW the facts.”

“Um . . . Muriel,” Tommy said, “why don’t Marcia and I take the rest of this delegation to lunch and show them around Enclave. Let them meet Envoys. Stuff like that. You take Daler to your office and hold the discussion there. I KNOW Chuck can come up with something for you to eat.”

“Good idea. OK, you go ahead with them. Daler, my office is right over there.”

Chapter 37

Separation (Saturday afternoon)

"Daler, I'm going to put it to you bluntly. If we carry this discussion much further, and I think you intend to, you're going to find out why people who take the training lose their belief in religion. So, I want you to make the choice, now, before we go any further, as to what is important to you."

"Truth," Daler said. "I'd rather know, as a fact, even if it loses me my religion."

"You're sure?" asked Muriel. At his nod, she continued, "There is no god. What was in that position was a parasite feeding off the worship of enslaved Envoys and humans. That stopped about six years ago, when Ted was killed and went to Home in a rage."

"And you can prove this?"

"Yes. I've been to Judgment Square and seen the vacant lot that used to have the hill and the throne. I could even take you. You'd go through the judgment, and it can be rough on an adult. Or, I could just train you, then show you how to get to Home, yourself. Either way, you'd know," she replied.

"And how would this prove it to me?" asked Daler.

"You'd meet people that know you. And you will know them, because they will have been friends or family that have died," Muriel said.

"And you've done this, yourself?"

"Yes. The first time I went there, I saw a friend of mine that had died a year before. And others have done the same thing. Melanie Carter, National Security Advisor and Secret Service officer met friends of hers that she'd been in the Marine Corps with. And her father, who is now the leader of those that meet the newly dead and try to help them over the shock of death and the Judgment. And I've been with a trainee that met his wife there. He became a trainee AFTER he went there and met with her," Muriel said.

"I see why you feel that you know," said Daler. "It's not only what you've seen yourself, but what others have seen that corresponds to your experiences."

"Yea, well it's not just a philosophical question to me," Muriel said. "Ever since I came out to Enclave and started training, I've insisted on concrete facts, not guesswork and belief. I've had to, since so much of the early stuff I went through had to go back to the local, state and federal government for legal action. It kinda rubs off."

"Well, since I already know the bad news . . . or at least some of it . . . is there any

chance that I can be trained?" asked Daler.

"Of course there's a chance, sir. Always was. But what about your religion?"

"Like you said, there are good parts of it. It's just that now I know that it isn't something of god. Just men, trying to understand. I can live with it, and still work with the people, I think." He paused. "Where do prayers go, now?"

"That one I can answer, since I asked Ted a couple of years ago, in a discussion. All that power is fed back into the universe. Eventually, some of it may become more Envoys, or the food you eat or the water you drink. Nothing is wasted," Muriel said. "It's just that the universe is so vast that it's less than a drop in the ocean. And as for becoming Envoys, well, you have to understand that Envoys are simply power – energy, if you will – that has reached a complexity to start intelligence and self awareness. That's what a soul is . . ." And she broke off, as Daler began the connection. A few minutes later, she stopped the 'come back' chant, and watched his face.

"You could have saved all the discussion by simply triggering that, couldn't you have?"

"Yep. But it wouldn't have been fair to you. I had to give you the opportunity to keep your beliefs. Oh, and I had to wait for you to ask. This isn't something that we force on other people. It would go against our balance, and make our next trip to Home rough," Muriel said. "So, our waiting for people to make their own decisions is actually in our own best interest."

"So, what happens now?" asked Daler.

"Geez, girl. You could have given him an opportunity to decide if he WANTED it," Don said, coming into her office.

"Yea, spending half the morning working with him, then the time over lunch, I guess I was a bit abrupt," Muriel shot back, and stuck out her tongue. Don just laughed. "Daler, this impossible person is – or a least was – a friend of mine. He's also the best trainer I've seen. I'm going to suggest that you let him complete the training. Partly because one element of it needs a gender specific trainer. And you'll understand when he gets to it. Because you connected, I doubt that it will take more than an hour."

Daler took the whole thing with a laugh. He'd caught the fact that banter and teasing between them was normal, and went with the flow. And he went through the rest of the training without incident. While Muriel was ensconced with her computer, trying to figure out how to get any of the remaining radicals to reveal themselves long enough to either capture or kill.

Marcia came in and said, "Stop it!"

"What?"

"I said stop it. You aren't qualified to make those plans or investigations. Not the way

we are. Oh, no doubt you could do it. You've done such before. But now, you've got a team of professionals. How about letting them do their job?"

"OK, what do you need? And how did you know?"

"How I knew was simple. We've always been able to tell when you start thinking hard about something, strongly. How do you think we were able to be ready for you, sometimes? And what I need is the intel you've got. And from that, what you need to have done," Marcia said.

"You think you can handle it?" Muriel asked. "It's a case of heads popping up, randomly, all over the country. Just enough similarity to make it look like the work of one person, but different enough to leave doubt. Like maybe it's different cells that all trained in the same place. Victims seem to have no connection. And nobody taking credit for the hits. Some of them involve explosives.

"Nice overview. I need the raw intelligence, and I need Fred's massage of it. Actually, what Fred has combines both, so I'll just get that," Marcia said. "And as for explosives. We also trained with Maintenance. And explosives were part of the reason we talked with the Seals. Everything from IEDs to military grade stuff. Basically, if you can't figure it out in the first minute, contain it and blow it."

"OK. In fact, why don't you work directly with Fred on it. That way you won't feel that you have to come to me for everything," Muriel said, then called out, "Fred, Marcia gets a copy of whatever you develop on the Iran radicals. And she may talk with you further on points as she goes along. OK?"

"Sure, Muriel. No problem. Her team, too?" he asked.

"No, that won't be necessary. I can pass it on to the ones that need it, once I know what's in it. The whole thing would just confuse some of them," Marcia said. "Would you mind working with me on it?"

"Oh, not at all. Just like with Muriel, I expect that you'll have interesting insights that might help in some of the gray areas," he said. "Though you might have to pass it to Carl, if I get deep into something. Will that be all right?"

"No problem. And I understand. I suffer from some of the same ailment, sometimes. I get so focused that I shut out everything around me. Something I have to watch, closely, that I don't get so locked in a loop that I miss something important."

"Oh, I never have that problem. I just go until I get all the details down, then break off and let it percolate," Fred said. Behind him, Carl quietly looked at him and raised an eyebrow, then looked at Marcia. It was all she could do to keep from laughing, but she managed to thank Fred for his help, and let him know she appreciated his work.

"Are you going to need a larger office?" asked Muriel. "Or maybe a separate one with

your whole team in it?

“Naw. For one thing, they all need their own space. And we can all work in our heads as easily as in person. Sometimes easier. Mesh mind works for investigations, too. At least, if everybody is operating at the same speed.” Marcia said, wincing. “Don’t ask,”

“Then, I’ll leave you to it. Will you keep me informed?”

“Of course. During the investigation, with updates and possibilities, so I can get your input and outrageous suggestions,” she said, grinning, “as well as before any action, to make sure that it meets with your approval and the philosophical structure of Enclave and Home.”

“Goof”

“Yea, I know. But sometimes it’s GOOD to tweak you a bit. Muriel,” she went on, seriously, “I don’t know everything. And I don’t expect you to, either. There are times I need to talk to you, because of your radically different way you look at things. I’m not trying to take something away from you, doing this. It’s just that with all the procedures we’ve acquired from Melanie and Henry, plus the methods we’ve learned from you, our team may be better equipped to do investigations of this nature. But we still need you and your input, because you DO have a unique way of looking at things that I still haven’t learned how to do.”

“You know? I actually get it. And it just took the sting out of having the investigation taken away from me. Yea. You’ve got the training and I don’t. And you see things from a different perspective than either Fred or I. But you still need us both. OK. THAT I can live with. Mostly because you’re telling me that you’ll keep me in the loop. The part I don’t know about is what I’m going to do with myself while I’m waiting for updates and information.”

“What you usually do,” Marcia said. “Find new people to train. Girl, you can’t even visit a friend to take him a statue without starting another training. Sometimes I think you’re a magnet. How’d that go, anyway?”

“Oh, Taylor told me later. He was old enough for the full training, and got his Citizenship with no sweat. And he’s gone on to train, from what Taylor says, about half his school,” she said, chuckling. “AND his mom. Oh, and Taylor says that the statue acts like another whoosh door. It’s kept traffic tangles down to a minimum. People drive up that road and see that, like it was coming right at them, and they slow down and are respectful at the light.”

“I can imagine,” Marcia said. “I saw that picture he posted on the Regiment’s website. Geez! That thing is huge. And you made it?”

“Nope. I made this one, and a six foot version. Steve, at the art gallery, did the heroic sized version. And they’re selling miniatures, like this, to visitors. Tourists,” Muriel said.

“You’re really getting into this, aren’t you? Going to do any others?”

"Well, maybe. Anna's a possibility. That formal costume of hers just begs for a statue showing her dancing," Muriel said. "And, I've thought of doing action figures, but I'd have to get everybody's permission first. Just a thought. Younger kids might like it. But when do I have time?"

"I bet if you got with our friends, Taylor, and Anna, they'd all go for it. Then pass it off to your friendly artist, and see if he knows anyone that would do the initial action figures. You'd have the kid's market sewn up as soon as they came out," Marcia said. "In fact, I'LL ask our friends. That'll give you a start." She went blank for a second, then came back with, "They're getting the blanket approval forms set up with the Lawyers, and will have them in your hands a little later. They all went for it. Jeff even broke off what he was doing, and is coming up with a prototype for each of us. That includes you, so be prepared to sign your own approval form."

"Do you really think that people would go for them?" asked Muriel. "I mean, after all, we were just kids!"

"Kids doing some of the nastiest jobs there were," replied Marcia. "Oh, I'm not objecting. They needed doing, and we did them with flair. And we made changes in the world by doing them. And I know kids. I also know how much action figures with limited movability cost. Each. We could put out poseable figures – Muriel and friends – the entire collection for the cost of ONE action figure from other manufacturers. And they'd never break, even if the dog chewed them," she added, with a slightly hurt look.

"How big?"

"Like your statue – twelve inches. Get with Frederica and see about starting a new company to make toys. Once the models are created, we turn them over to the company with Envoy training to turn out. All they have to do is copy and package them. Frederica would know how to get them in stores. And I'd bet they'd be off the shelves within days. Not only that, they wouldn't just be going to kids. There are adults that remember our adventures, and would love to have them as memories, even if they never took them out of the packaging."

"OK, OK, YOU do it. Talk to Frederica and get it set up. I'll sign the papers. Oh, and we should probably get patents on it, and whatever else the lawyers can think of," Muriel said.

"You got it. This'll be fun. Oh, and by the way, I already talked to Frederica about it, and she's just waiting for your OK to buy the property and start hiring. And the lawyers already have the paperwork. All that's needed is for you to sign your approval to use your figure."

"Fat lot of good that will do. I HAD no figure in those days."

"Silly girl. You KNOW what I mean. Stop being such a grumpy. This is going to draw people into Enclave, and into training. Frederica even has contacts in other countries for them. She put out feelers, and got some very positive responses. And quite reasonable licensing agreements. And yes, they've been checked by the lawyers," Marcia said. "You're

popular, girl. Whether you know it or not. Carla's been going over the packaging for the figures, and is excited. She's come up with a bunch of names. I think the top one was 'Muriel – The Leader of Home, and friends'."

"Oh, gad. That sounds like a comedy show."

"Then come up with a different name."

"You really want this, don't you? You, and the rest of our friends."

"Um . . . yea. We do. It puts a face to us. You're known all over. But us, we're all lumped together as 'and friends'. As in 'Muriel and her friends'. And sometimes it bugs us. Some of us are known for other things, and that's fine. But then, we go and do our job, and somebody says something like, 'why'd you go with her. Why not one of Muriel's friends'. MAN, that hurts," Marcia said. Muriel looked at her, then came to a decision.

"OK, here's how it goes. Have Jeff put name tags on the uniforms. I presume you're intending Class 'A' uniforms, anyway. And on the packaging, put your names. Jobs, too, if you want to. Make the title for the assembly 'Ambassadors All'," Muriel said, and grinned. "That way, there's no differentiation between us except maybe our jobs. OK?"

"Carla's going to be mad. You just trumped her, again. And it's a GOOD name. OK, OK, I'll be the one to tell her," Marcia said. "And thanks for figuring out what we really wanted. Again." And she grinned and translated out. The next thing Muriel heard was a large whoop from two doors down. And Muriel grinned.

Chapter 38

Togetherness
(Monday morning)

"OK, she bought it," Marcia said as she translated into the hall for their offices. The whoop that went up must have been heard all over Enclave. "She even agreed to be a part of it. Now, I want . . ."

"On it," one of her troops said. "I've got Frederica. Bruce has got the lawyers, and Jeff already knows to turn out the figures. Carla's been working on the packaging, and is grumbling because of Muriel's change in name means a change in packaging. But, we'll get it, and she's not really mad. Oh, and Taylor and Anna are on board to do the same thing. And get this! Staid, conservative Chun? Same thing. And we're starting to get requests from other countries, too." And a flurry of activity started.

A half hour later, a laughing Jeff said, "That's got to be the fastest a factory was ever set up. Oh, and Muriel signed the papers. We're legal. ALL of the factory is Envoys, from management to janitors. And the first five hundred thousand sets will be on their way Monday morning, delivered by Envoys to the individual toy stores."

"News update," said another. "We've got local channels covering the 'event', and Carla

even came up with display stands that feature our actual faces and names, and jobs, to top it. There's also teasers going out tonight on the evening news. Alice, in legal, said not to advertise, that it would take care of itself. Just give a news release with a picture of the package, and a picture of the display top. And understate it."

"So, now all we do is wait, and see what happens. Guys," Marcia said, "I will warn you. The way the dolls are rigged, we may get a lot of breakthroughs. To give you an idea of how many, Fran's already asked Mark to cover for her tomorrow. And he said that he'd cover as long as he was needed, and has a squad of Envoy doctors to help."

Monday saw national news showing long lines of parents and kids at the stores. Each of five hundred stores across the country had a thousand packages of 'Ambassadors All' action figures. Many of the lines included adults alone – without children. And, in a subsequent story, information was coming in that a record number of 'call in sick' calls were coming into business across the country. It seemed to be an epidemic of colds and intestinal flue. Muriel took the news with a raised eyebrow, and Ted just laughed. This little stunt, pulled off by Muriel's friends, looked to top any of the outrageous things that she'd done.

As eight o'clock rolled around, and the lines began to move, it was obvious that many of the stores would run out of the action figures long before they ran out of people that wanted them. Stores weren't allowed to say 'only one package per family'. Children in a family very often got to share one set between them. But what of the parents that wanted a set for themselves because they had seen the exploits of these remarkable children on the news and understood the historic significance of their adventures? Yep, you guessed it. By nine o'clock many stores were in serious jeopardy of running out of 'Ambassadors All'.

Which is why five hundred Envoys translated into parking lots and walked up to the stores, and were admitted ahead of others because of the distinctive Envoy uniform they wore. The news trucks and remote crews were spun up to witness the arrival of these creatures that many had heard of but few had seen in real life. And the Envoys grinned at the reaction their arrival produced. And people wondered. The reporters did more than wonder. They requested admission to the stores to be able to share with their viewers what the Envoys were going to do. Thank goodness for wireless technology. Cameras with cables weren't allowed in the store for safety reasons. The reporters got around this by either having cameras that were capable of connecting wirelessly to receivers in the remote van, or used cell phones that could capture the scene.

And what they saw was unbelievable. The Envoys were apparently restocking the display with the packages of action figures from an empty box. And 'Ambassadors All' continued to fly off the shelves of the display for the rest of the day.

By this time, the raised eyebrow of Muriel was in Marcia's office, and the rest of her was sitting on the corner of her desk, asking pointed questions. "You mean to tell me that they're duplicating the stock in batches of ten, and putting them on the shelves?" asked the mouth below the eyebrow.

"Yep. And in some cases, they're passing them directly to families, rather than putting

them on the shelves. Ten million dollars of original stock, plus whatever the Envoys create in each of the stores. That's twenty thousand dollars each of the stores made in the first hour or so," Marcia said, laughing. "But wait! That's not all!"

"OK, stop trying to act like a TV commercial. What else have you done?" asked Muriel, still trying to come to grips with the fact that this Band of Children were that popular.

"In each package is a book that outlines the talents of each of us. Oh, not completely, but enough to give the figures – and us – a bit of an explanation. It also outlines what the basic Envoy training is," Marcia said. "And there's no 'add-on' packs to buy. Plus, for those with Envoy training, the figures really are action figures, and not just fully poseable figurines. There's also pictures of our offices, and descriptions of the things we do with our abilities."

"You're giving away all our secrets, huh?"

"Oh, much worse than that. We expect that it may spark the connection in some of the kids. And we've got Envoys standing by to come in and train them. At least to whatever level they can be safely trained. But a lot of these are going to twelve and thirteen year old kids, so they should be able to take the full training," Marcia said, laughing. "And each of us are geared up to go in and explain to parents what the training is, and how it will help the kids. And the parents."

"Go on. I can hear it coming," Muriel growled.

"Taylor, Anna and Chun have already given us permission to turn out action figures of them and their support groups. Taylor, and four squads of 'Jolly Greens', Anna and her troop of Envoys, and Chun and her distinctive squads," Marcia said.

"I would think that they'd want to turn out their own versions," Muriel said. "After all, the target consumers would be in their countries."

"Yes, they would. And they will," Marcia replied. "But many people have heard of them or seen them on television here in this country. As a result, we'll need to be able to supply them, too. Actually, Jeff already has the models, and Carla has the packaging ready. Tommy did the books. We just didn't feel that we should do more than one 'first day' at a time. Give the parents time to be able to come up with the money for the next set. The initial set for each of them has gone out, so that Taylor, Anna and Chun can get their own factories set up. The factories are owned, outright, by Triple E, and administered locally. We're simply providing the initial models for them to work with."

"You really did think this all out, didn't you? But Chun and China don't have a cash economy."

"True," Marcia said. "But Chun has found a way for her people to be able to have the figures. I don't know all the details, but I think that what it amounts to is that any adult that wants the figures for themselves or their children will be taught how to duplicate them. And, of course, stock of her and her crew will be made there, and shipped to other Enclaves to be

sold through their extensions of Triple E. This avoids all the import/export problems. This will give Chun the cash reserves necessary to do some of the things she needs to do that actually requires cash.”

“So, when do you start on the others?”

“Give this a month before we start on the next round here. That shouldn’t be as traumatic as today’s was. Besides, it gives Tyler time to build up his stock after the big push in Britain. Anna’s a bit of a problem, but we’re working on it. She’s got a good crew in the Triple E extension, there, but not the manpower in legal that she needs to pull this off. Chun – no problem. And no legal problems there. The only thing is setting up a Triple E extension in China. And we’re getting some activity from other countries, too, that want to cash in on this. It’s big, Muriel. Certainly one of the biggest things that we kids have done.”

“Yea, and you thought of it on your own, and implemented it on your own,” Muriel said. “In some ways, I’m amazed. Mostly, at the scope of the project, though some of the amazement is how well you planned it out.”

“We actually didn’t expect as large a turnout as we got for the initial release. Oh, I forgot to ask. Would you like a set. Just to show that you know what’s going on?”

“Yea, but where would I put them?”

“Shelves. Put up a glass wall behind you, and put the boxes on the shelves to one side, where you won’t run into them. Oh, you don’t have to take them out of the boxes to display them. Carla made the packaging so that they all fit neatly back into the box. The book can be slid out of the back so they can read it. And parents won’t have to worry about stepping on them in a dark room,” Marcia grinned. “Well, it won’t stop all of it, knowing kids. But it’ll help.”

“And you say it may up the number of kids that reach breakthrough?” asked Muriel.

“Yes. Number one, the kids are going to be thinking about the various Envoy techniques we teach. And number two, the figures are actually set up to be used with the Envoy techniques, and just handling them may spark it,” said Marcia. “But, we’ve got Envoys from Home monitoring the possibility, and should be able to cover it all right. We kids may have to do some running around to tell parents what’s going on with their child, and calm them down. But I don’t think it will be more than one percent of the kids that get the figures that will hit breakthrough.”

“Well,” Muriel said, “it will certainly spread it around the country. I’d better get back to my office. I expect the kids will be opening the packages, soon.” As she prosaically walked back to her office, mulling over what she’d heard from Marcia, she realized that what her friend was doing was as big in its own way as her own task, but in no way conflicted. Marcia had taken on the advertising of the ‘good guy’ image of Envoys and those trained, but that image built off of what Muriel was already doing. She was so deep in thought, that she almost ran into Daler.

"Daler! I thought you and your friends would have left."

"They did. I didn't. They know I've been trained, and they're not upset. But they also know that I need some time to come to terms with these new abilities," he said. "I hope you don't mind."

"Of course I don't mind," Muriel said with some strength and a lot of warmth. "Wasn't it explained to you? This is as much your home as anyplace, because you're a Citizen of Home."

"Oh. Well . . . really . . . oh, my. This does make a difference. Well, it may have been explained to me, but not quite that way. Now, I think I understand." Daler said. "Oh . . . this is going to take some getting used to. But I appreciate it."

"You earned it," Muriel said. "It's why we're here. Have you had a chance to talk with my friends and my squads?"

"Your squads, yes, some," he said. "Your friends have been busy, so I didn't get much of a chance to do more than say 'hi'."

"Daler, can you hold on a second? I've got a call" Muriel said. She looked thoughtful for a few seconds, then puzzled. "Mata?"

"Ask Jeff," Mata replied. "That shouldn't be happening. You DID charge it up last night, didn't you?"

"Of course. Every night," Muriel replied.

"It's not the charge," Jeff said, coming in. "Let me see it." Muriel took it out of her 'no pocket' and handed it to him. He opened it up and studied it for a couple of seconds. Then turned to Mata. "This was gotten through the regular carrier, wasn't it?"

"Just like always," Mata replied.

"OK, Muriel, I'm going to replace it, but it'll take a little bit to do it. I've got a prototype I've been working on that you can use, but I'll have to get it set up with a carrier. Oh, and I'm starting a lawsuit against the original carrier. It's not the phone. We've been time-bombed."

"What?" It came out as a shout.

"They monkeyed with the operating system to cause it to die, like it was an equipment failure, weeks before the end of the contract, to try to force you to buy a new phone at their expensive rates, and with all their add-on charges," he said. "First, let me get the new one set up for you. We WON'T go through this again!" He took a seat in her casual area, and got that far-away look that indicated fast and furious mental sends. "OK, that's taken care of. By the way, did you back up your contacts the way I suggested?"

“Yes. They're on my computer,” Muriel said.

“Good. Then this will only take a second more,” he said. Suddenly there was a phone in his hand that looked nothing like the phones that Enclave had been using. Muriel's hard drive spun up for a second, then he handed it to her.

“This phone is made out of shields, just the way your computer is, but with a lot of advances. There are actually two operating systems on it. One is mine, just like on the computers, with some upgrades. But the other is an Open Source operating system that drives the phone functions,” he said. “The reason for the second is simply to connect the phone to the computer side of this device. This has the capability of actually replacing your desktop computer, and without the hassles of learning a new operating system or programs.”

“What? You're confusing me.”

“Yea, but that's easy,” he said, and Muriel threw a stapler at him. He just laughed when it stuck a foot away from him. “This is literally your new computer. It will interface to the one on your desk, or any of the monitors that you're near. It will NOT interface with my computer, or anyone else's computer. But you can reach yours anywhere in the world, because it makes use of the same mental link that we use to send to each other. But when you use it as a phone, it uses the second operating system, that's in a virtual environment, to interface with the new carrier. Oh, same phone number, so you don't have to go through all that hassle of changing it with everyone. Oh, and you can use this as both a computer and a phone at the same time,” he added. “Oh, and the court action won't involve you. This is a criminal offense, and it's going to federal court, but NOT in your name. I'm initiating it, on behalf of Enclave. And the paperwork has already gone out, through my lawyer, to the court and to the old carrier.”

“What was that you said, something about a time-bomb?” Muriel said.

“That? Not the type that's explosive. This is a program running on the phone to make it look like the equipment failed through some fault of yours, and to happen at a certain time,” Jeff said. What happens is that when the program counts down to that particular time, it initiates a subprogram that makes it look like you dropped it, or something – I'll have to search the program to see what the actual action is – and makes it fail. The program is actually part of the operating system that the carrier used, and the programmer's name is on it as the copyright holder. So, we've got both the carrier and the individual. They were banking on a user not being able to prove that they DIDN'T cause the failure to get out of being held liable. They never counted on me.”

“Jeff, have I told you, lately, that you're a genius?” asked Muriel.

“Yea. I know,” he said, casually. And she threw a paperweight at him. And Daler started laughing, and Mata cleaned off her screen, AGAIN! That just set Daler to laughing harder. And when Muriel went over to Jeff and retrieved the stapler and paperweight – and he innocently asked if she was reloading – he laughed even harder.

Chapter 39

Companionship (Monday afternoon)

It's the little things that count.

The whoosh doors whooshed open. Then slowly closed. Then whooshed open. Then slowly closed. Chuck came in with some tuna in a bowl. Just plain tuna.

"You're going to need this," he said. "You'll understand in a minute." Then he walked into range of the sensor and the doors whooshed open. Chuck stayed put, to hold the doors open, and an alien marched, then scampered in, headed for Muriel.

"What the . . . ?"

"*meep*," came the reply from the alien.

"How the heck did you get into Enclave?" asked Muriel, just as the alien decided that a frontal assault was appropriate, and began to piton it's way up the western slope of Muriel's uniform pants. It's single-minded objective appeared to be the bowl in her hand, and it didn't appear to be willing to take 'no' for an answer.

"*meep*," it said, as it finished scaling her knee, glanced up at her, then headed directly for the bowl and began eating..

"Chuck, thank you. How did you know?" asked Muriel.

"I saw it, out front, startled and puzzled by the door opening," he replied.

"Yes, but how did you know it would head for me?"

"Oh, that's simple. You were the one with the tuna," he said, laughing. "By the way, I think it's a girl. No prominent display of boy-hood under the flagstaff of a tail. Can't be very old, either. I've already got it out on the mesh mind, to see if anyone knows whose it is."

"Check out front, too," Jeff said. "To see if there's any others out there. Some people drop off unwanted kittens on the edge of the highway."

"Already on it, Jeff," Chuck said, smiling. "There's Envoys going up and down both sides of the road, now. It looks like it's adopted you, Muriel. Is that going to be a problem?"

"Not to me. Oh, kitty litter boxes. One in my apartment, Hmm, I'm not sure where. And one down here, on the far side of my desk, I think. Where it'll be out of the way," she said. "She's like a miniature black panther. So tiny, and glossy black. And huge eyes."

"Yes. Definitely a charmer," Daler said. "And quite fearless. And very determined to get her own way," he said, chuckling at the implied parallel to Muriel. The kitten, now happily full, proceeded to wash itself, and Muriel moved the bowl away. Chuck took it and watched in fascination as the cat proceeded to circle on Muriel's lap, then laid down in the hollow formed by her legs, and right up against her abdomen. Ted came in, his hands held behind his back. He took one look, and opened his mouth.

"I should warn you, Ted. Any off-color remarks about the location of the kitten could result in my slowly skinning you, alive," Muriel said.

"What? No! Who? Me? Not on your life," Ted said. "I wouldn't dream of saying anything. I was just wondering where you found it. Because I seem to be similarly afflicted," he said, taking his hands from behind his back, and showing her another kitten. This one was gray and white..

"It found me," Muriel replied. "I really don't know where it came from. There's Envoys out, now, trying to find that out." The kitten in Ted's hands 'meeped'. The one on Muriel's lap woke up, looked at it, and answered, then launched off her lap and landed on the floor, looking up at the gray and white. Ted quickly set his little bundle down, and it walked over to the black one, sniffed it, and started grooming it. Then next thing they knew, the two were rolling on the floor, apparently fighting.

Jeff laughed, and said, "Leave them alone. They're not actually fighting. I've seen this before, usually between kittens that have been raised together. I'd bet they're sisters."

"That still doesn't explain where they came from, or whose they are," said Muriel.

"So, what do we do with them in the mean time?" asked Ted.

"We take care of them. Food, water, litter boxes, and attention," said Muriel. "Chuck is coming up with something for this one to eat. He could probably let your cook know what it is and how to make it."

"Or," Chuck said, coming back into her office, "I could just make it for him. Doing for two is no worse than doing for one. And I've got a variety of dishes for them, so they can choose what they like. It took me some time to find out the nutritional needs of kittens and cats, but I got it."

"Thanks, Chuck. Just don't let me see any of it as 'what's for dinner', please," Muriel said. Chuck laughed.

"No, nothing like that. Though, I'll admit that the thought crossed my mind. But that would be too much of a practical joke, and you'd never trust me again," he said. "Muriel, you're set up. Kitty litter box down here on the far side of your desk, and one up in your apartment next to the elevator. Both covered. I figured food and water dishes should be some distance away and somewhat protected, so they're behind the chair in the front corner of your office. Oh, and I've got the same arrangement for Ted's office and apartment, as well

as a 'volunteer'," he said, using air quotes on the word, "to look after the kitty litter boxes."

"Thanks, Chuck. I appreciate it," Muriel said with a smile.

"Yea, thanks, Chuck," Ted hastily offered, prompted by Muriel's thanks. "We may move them around, depending on how things work out. But that sound like a good start."

"Jeff, I have a job for you. You've created computers and a phone and an operating system. What are the chances of actually producing them for the general public, and would they be able to use them?" asked Muriel.

"Yes, they could use them. Not only that, but they would be able to run programs from any of the other operating system without modification and without having to resort to a virtual machine. Oh, and the phone uses the same operating system. There's a lot more to that phone than there appears to be. It's actually a next generation of the computers, miniaturized beyond belief, based on the fact that shields are actually semi-intelligent," he replied. "That's why it can connect so easily to your computer. And as for the general public being able to use them, well . . . there are some functions that they wouldn't be able to use, because they don't have the Envoy training. And now that we have prototypes for them, I don't see a problem with making more of them, other than the need to have trained people to build them. Or duplicate them, at least."

"Good. We're going into the telecommunication business," Muriel replied. "I want to flood the market with these, and teach that outfit we've been using that it's not a good idea to time-bomb us. Any word on that, yet?"

"Nope. Oh, the paperwork is into the court, along with the brief and a list of the various proofs we have of their messing with the programming. It's too early to hear the screams of the company we were doing business with, yet. And it wasn't just you," he said. "Ted already has a new one of mine, and just after we gave it to him his old one died. Frederica said it would be no problem to set up a company to produce them, or the computers. She also said that setting up a telecom company wouldn't be any worse. I don't have all the details of the setup, of course. Following your basic plan, I don't need to know EVERYTHING, as long as I steer it in the general direction. The big problem is getting people to work in them – getting them trained."

"OK, get on it, and let me know if there's any boggles," Muriel said. "Especially with the court case. This 'walled garden' mentality of corporations has GOT to stop. And I'll be talking with the President about the mess with patents. Every time some company goes to war with another company over patents, the one's that are hurt are the very people that pay their salaries. And they don't understand that. They are as bad as the arms manufacturers, thinking that slapping a fresh coat of paint on something and selling it at a higher price is all they have to do. They've stopped innovating, because they're afraid that some other company will hit them with patent violations. I want to end that farce."

"Good luck," said Ted. "It's not just Congress you've got to convince. It's the courts. Especially the Supreme Court. They've allowed this mess to go on for so long that it's an

industry of its own. Millions of dollars go to non-practicing entities – patent trolls – that raise the prices on manufactured goods beyond what many people can afford. And that's just one element of the equation. I agree, it's got to stop. But too many companies look at what's coming in as money, without seeing the phenomenal cost of all the litigation. It's how we managed to take some of the companies to begin with. You remember the mess with the MPAA.”

“Boy! Do I. And it was so worth it to crush them. But there's still work to be done, and I'm going to see to it, if I have to take Congress and the Supreme Court to Judgment Square and let them SEE just how bad their behavior is, and who it's hurting. They know. They just don't want to acknowledge it. It's as bad as the housing bubble,” Muriel said. “What fools these mortals be,” she added, quoting Shakespeare.

“Hmm. Rather Puckish of you, isn't it?” Ted asked. And once again, the paperweight was airborne. Ted just laughed, and replaced it on her desk. “Seriously, though. How are you going to do it?”

“By being a bigger bully, of course. I'm going to be a patent troll's troll,” she said, sweetly.

“Uh, huh. And how does one do that?”

“I'm going to flood the USPTO with every piece of prior art I can find on every patent that the NPEs use, and that any company uses for attack. And I'm going to make them stick,” Muriel said. And this time, she wasn't sounding sweet. “I'm going to make myself so unpopular that they'll do something stupid, like try to pass a law against me. And I'll publish everything I do to the media.”

“And, you're going to do this all by yourself?”

“HA! Nope. I'm going to use a secret weapon. Their own files – the files of the NPEs and the files of the companies that are doing the attacks,” Muriel said. “Couple that with everything published concerning each of the patents, and when. Then send off a large batch at a time.”

“That's still going to take a lot of manpower,” Ted said.

“Nope. Just Jeff's computer. In fact, it's already working on it. And now I know how the Envoys in Home are able to do some of the things they do. Only they're working with raw power and shields.”

“WHAT! I just came up with that design,” Jeff said.

“Yep. You did. And you made some improvements on what they did. And they're scrambling to see if they can top you. And before you ask how I know,” Muriel said, and just pointed to Mata. “They've got a history of everything that's happened on earth for the past two hundred years as their CURRENT files. And my computer is tied to that and working on

the correlation, now. In fact, it's been working on NPEs first, per my instructions, and I've got a fair cross section of them already done. I intend to take a completed package to the head of the USPTO, and demand that they be looked into, to the exclusion of any other work. In other words, tie up all the examiners with work that should have been done YEARS ago, that they didn't do."

"You're serious!"

"As a heart attack. This nonsense has got to stop," Muriel said. "Do you realize that there are companies that are strangling some of the poorer countries by introducing their goods and forcing out production in those countries. Foodstuffs is only one area, and that one's pernicious. The software company that we bought four years ago was doing the same sort of thing. I stopped that, then, and we helped the countries that had been damaged by that process to re-develop their computer industry. Or, in some cases, to develop it in the first place."

"So, when do you plan to bomb the USPTO with this mass of paperwork?" asked Ted.

"Sometime in the next week, I'd imagine," said Muriel. "Oh, and this will be made public. I've got a couple other gimmicks to work out before we can do it. But it will be done. Their only hope is to purchase our computers to do the work with. Talk about lock-in. Without it, it would take years to complete, and in the mean time NO other patents could be approved."

"I don't think you can get that forced through," Ted said. "They're more apt to put one elderly examiner on your stuff, and go merrily on their way."

"Nope. They caused the mess. They're going to clean it up. That's one of the gimmicks that I'm working on. Trust me. You've seen how I work," Muriel replied. "This is a bit more complicated, but it WILL work, because the orders for them to do it are going to come from the top, AND they will be monitored for performance."

"Wait a minute! I just caught one of the things you said. You said, 'Their only hope is to purchase our computers to do the work with.' They aren't going to buy our computers," Ted said, vehemently.

"Then they'll never get the job done. It's just too big for them to handle with their post Civil War era computers. Have you SEEN those things? They should have been retired fifty years ago," Muriel said. "A common cell phone, like the one that got time-bombed, has more computer power than their desktop ones. Oh, and then there's the laws that they've bent to the breaking point with some of their determinations. And somebody got the courts to back them. Well, the courts are just going to have to back down. All this graft and payola and bribery have GOT to stop. Otherwise, in another fifty years, all there'll be on this continent is a bunch of people pounding game over the head with stone axes."

"Um, isn't that a bit of an exaggeration?"

“You tell me, in fifty years, if I fail to get this accomplished,” she replied. And Ted shivered. “You tell me if it's an exaggeration THEN, when ninety percent of the population starves to death, technology breaks down, and the handful of people left don't want to know anything at all about some upstart country called the United States of America, because it's a dirty word. You tell me, then, when all that's left are people that are bullies. When women are relegated to breeding with whatever man wants her, whether she wants to or not. Ted, this is why I'm trying to get as many people trained as possible, as fast as possible. I see this coming, from a number of different directions. And the one thing I don't want to hear in fifty years is 'they did it to themselves'.”

“Muriel, update. About 3,000 were affected by the figurines,” Jeff said. “Not all at the same time. Our friends were kept hopping, introducing Envoys, but things have settled down, now.”

“So, how come you were here, instead of with them?”

“Somebody had to interface with you, and keep you advised,” Jeff said. “I drew the short straw. Besides, I wanted to know what you were going to do next, in case it affected us in some way. And it does. Well, at least me. But I was already working on phone and computer manufacturing. The only thing I didn't know about was creating the telephone company. And Frederica's on that. Well, Betty, too, jumping people up with the electronics engineering courses and the new programming. We'll be ready to start producing, shortly. By the way, you two might want to take care of your nap attacks,” he added, pointing to the kitten pile in the middle of the floor. Ted and Muriel retrieved their tired kitties by simply no-hands lifting them – Ted to his arms, and Muriel to her lap.

Chapter 40

It Begins

(Monday morning, two weeks later)

"Mister President. Did you get the package I sent you?" asked Muriel.

"Yes. And I read it. Is any of this true?"

"All of it, sir. Unfortunately, all of it. And it goes back at least sixty years. This has got to stop," Muriel said. "No, actually, it's got to be reversed. You've got patents out there that have no business ever having been approved. Every one of them is either on a natural process, a mathematical algorithm, or prior art. And the people that passed these patents were hoodwinked into thinking it was something new. Worse, the courts approved them, too – people that had absolutely no sense of what was going on allowed these to proliferate, and created precedent for even worse abuses. And now you've got a mess, with non-practicing entities suing everybody in sight, and companies suing each other in an effort to create a monopoly in their field. In addition, you can see that many of the people that allowed this to take place had connections to the companies involved. This is the worst sort of corruption that there is. As bad as the lobbying bribery that was going on when you originally took office. And it's directly against the purposes set forth in the Constitution."

"Treason, then."

"Yes, sir. And if it isn't reversed, in fifty years there won't BE a United States of America," Muriel said. "Your call, sir."

"I honestly don't see what I can do about it."

"My suggestion is to not look at it as separate actions, but rather as a generalized bullying for greed," she replied. "This constitutes a clear and present danger to the United States. There is nothing in it that's for the good of the people. Only the good of a few companies that have managed to carve out a foothold in the necessities of the people. This is as bad as what the banks and Wall Street were doing. It's some minor Duke carving out an empire for himself while the kingdom goes to hell."

"And there's nothing you can do?" he asked.

"There's plenty I can do. I can take the judicial committee and every federal judge from the circuit to the Supreme Court to Home. However, once they realize how much harm they've done, all you'd be getting back would be bodies. Is that what you want?"

"No," he said. "That wouldn't solve anything. We'd simply have new people spouting old ideas. Trickle down – they might as well call it pissing on everyone. The corporations are NOT the lifeblood of the country. People are. I thought we had this mess stopped."

Muriel looked sympathetically at him. "No, sir. Not stopped. We curtailed one path to it. But it didn't stop the corruption. In fact, it barely made a pause in it. I'll give you a case in point. One of my friends invented a new type of computer. None of the components are made along the lines of anything that's been made on earth, before. The programming uses nothing of any other operating system or programming. Yet we aren't allowed to sell it, or even give it away because a court found that it was similar to something that another company had done. That judge, by the way divested himself of stock in that company. He did it by signing it over to his wife. It's to his benefit to have that company to the forefront of the industry. My friend also made a phone. He made it because the carrier my phone was on time-bombed my phone to die two weeks prior to the conclusion of the contract. Therefore, I'd have to buy a new phone at the full price. We proved our case in court. The jury accepted our side of the story. The judge reversed it on the grounds that no reasonable jury could have found that way. Same sort of story, but this time he was operating on behalf of friends."

"Do you have either of them here?" asked the President.

"Yes, sir. Here's the phone. And if you tell me where to put it, I can have the computer here in a second," Muriel said.

"Let's start with this," he said, taking the phone from her. As it touched his hand, he suddenly jerked, and dropped it. "Good grief! What was that?"

"The phone is made of shields. Any normal person can operate it without trouble. A trained person feels the connection to the shields, and suddenly there's a whole new range of things that the phone can do. This one is linked to my computer in my office. I can call up any program, any data, any information that I have on my computer. In fact, this is actually a second generation computer, and can hold more and do more than the one on my desk. But it's much smaller. This is actually meant for trained people, rather than the general public. NOTHING in this phone is based on technology as it's normally thought of."

"How much does something like this cost?"

"Us? Just the time to make it. One man can turn out about fifty of them a day, without straining. They can be modified in the field, by a trained person, to fit the needs and style of the individual purchasing it. And I believe Jeff set the retail price at fifty dollars. Oh, the person buying them never has to buy another. Just come back for upgrades occasionally," Muriel said, grinning.

"What's the operating system?"

"Oh, now that's the special part. In actuality, there isn't one. It's ALL shields, and shields are semi-intelligent. Give the shield some basic parameters, and it behaves like a computer, complete with storage – vast storage – and connectivity to anything the individual wants to control. Oh, and so called malware? Whoever sends out the malware had better have a LOT of money, because the shields react to it by destroying the source computers. In fact, we found one section of the FBI had been trying to play games with us – trying to find out how we got our information. They tried to tap our computers. They ended up having to

replace ALL of theirs. And when Henry and Adam found out, they had to replace all the people in the department, too. You've heard the expression 'it's not nice to fool mother nature'? I've got news for you, it's disastrous to try to mess around with Home. Know how Henry and Adam knew there was something wrong? Smoke. Every one of their computers was smoked. And the fools tried to justify their actions DESPITE the fact that they'd been told specifically to never try any electronic surveillance of Enclave."

"Shields. Semi-intelligent shields. That's how Jeff designs cars, too, isn't it?"

"Yep," Muriel said. "All part of the same set of tricks. Envoy training."

"I can remember when it was just a way to protect oneself and get around. Oh, and make clothes and things. You have the names of the judges that acted against these?"

"Oh, sure. They're buried in that pack, but if you just connect to the phone and ask, you'll get their names, addresses, present location, photo, and the background information concerning what happened," Muriel said.

"Voice recognition?"

"Oh, nothing like that. MENTAL recognition. I told you, it takes the training to open up some parts of it," Muriel said.

"And some judge said that this was a copy of some other company's product?"

"Yep."

"Bring him here," growled the President. "I want to have a LONG talk with him. Is there a way to get a printout of this?"

"Just tell the phone to send it to your printer," Muriel said.

"But, they're not connected!"

"Trust me. Try it," Muriel said. The President did, and shortly he had about 20 pages on his desk.

He leafed through them, briefly, paused at the judge's summation of the case and his conclusions, and said, "Get him here, NOW! This will stop. And I hope you're recording, because I want a copy to go with a press conference. I'm putting the judicial on notice that this is NOT appropriate behavior." A moment later, the man was standing in front of the President's desk.

"What the hell is this!" he exclaimed.

"Do you know me?" asked the President. "Do you know who I am?"

"Of course. You're the President. How did I get here? Why am I here?"

"You're here because you made a mistake. A serious mistake. And now I'm asking for your resignation. As to how you got here, you were translated directly from your office by techniques that you not only don't have, but have never investigated. And that's obvious from the judgment you made in a case involving a cell phone. Here's paper. Here's a pen. Write!" said the President.

"I will NOT! I made a valid judgment"

"You made a judgment in favor of a company to which you have connections. You made a judgment contrary to the evidence, and without even trying to understand what the product in question could do. You have violated every concept of justice, and are not worthy of your job. I'm allowing you to resign, now. If you continue to refuse, then you will be fired, and criminal charges will be leveled against you," the President said. "I'm thoroughly tired of the idiocy of people based on greed. I'm tired of the corruption of people that are in sensitive areas of the government. And it's going to stop. And you will be the poster boy for the change to come. You will serve to give notice to all the rest that the corruption ends, or the criminal charges start."

"What was the case?" asked the judge. The President held up the phone. "That? It's a knockoff. It violates every patent on cell phones that there is!"

"Really? Did you look at it? Did you try it? Or did you simply take the word of that company that brought the charges. I've seen the drawings on how this phone is made. I notice that the company you supported offered no drawings of theirs. I've seen how strong this phone is. And I know from my personal experience that the phone the company you supported makes can't take a three foot drop without breaking. Muriel? Do you mind?"

"Feel free, sir." And the President threw it across the room at the wall. The phone bounced off. Muriel retrieved it, and handed it back to the President.

"Hmm. Still works. Not a scratch. Not a crack in the case or in the display. Shall we go outside and see what a nine millimeter bullet can do to it?" asked the President. "I think you'd have to agree that the manufacturing process is NOT the same as that of the company you supported. Nor are the materials. Muriel, can I open it up?"

"Sure," she said, and sent him the instructions, mentally. He followed the instructions, and the back came off, easily.

"Now, show me the central processing unit. Show me the memory. Show me the battery, even," said the President.

"I can't be expected to know such things!"

"Really? Yet you feel qualified to pass judgment on whether or not this copies any of the other company's methods? I think not. This phone doesn't even have an operating

system like the one you supported. I think you passed judgment against this phone based on the fact that you or your friends had financial connections to the other one. You violated your oath of office. And you have, in your own way, violated the Constitution you swore to defend. Do you begin to understand the magnitude of the mistake you made? Do you begin to understand that you are in deep shit?" By this time, the President was bellowing. "I want your resignation, or you're going out of this room in handcuffs. And either choice will be made public."

"Mister President, I can not, in good conscience, refute the judgment I made, or resign as a result of your desultory remarks. I will oppose you and your actions to the best of my ability, and will report this action to the highest judicial levels."

"Melanie," said the President. She motioned to two of the Secret Service officers in attendance, and they arrested the judge for conspiracy to commit fraud and other charges. He left the room in handcuffs.

"His office is being searched, now," Melanie said. "And his home, sir. We're also looking into lockers in his club and other places he's known to frequent. He knows that he's going to be thrown away. But I think he still thinks that the stock his wife has in the company will support him and her."

"Not when I get through with them, it won't. They rushed this into court, didn't they. Cases like this usually take months or years to reach court, and usually end up in front of a jury. I see there was no jury in this case. Why? What are the chances of pulling in the ones that brought the case against Enclave?" asked the President.

"There was no jury because, despite the fact that we requested one, the judge wouldn't allow it. And yes, it was rushed into court, and done as a hearing rather than a trial," Muriel said. "None of our evidence was allowed, and all of theirs was. All on spurious reasons like 'it would take too long to go through all this. I think we can take care of this quickly'," she quoted.

"I didn't see that in the transcript. Did you make a record of the hearing?" the President asked. Muriel just handed him a DVD. "Of course you made a record. Silly me, to have asked," and Muriel grinned.

"I believe you want this one, too," she said, handing him another. "This is the record of this meeting."

"Yes, I do. I intend to have some fun with the media, and make an example of this person. Violating the oath he took to become a federal judge is one thing. Conspiracy to commit fraud in order to promote one company over another is criminal. Melanie, what do we need to pull that company and its lawyers in, and grab their records?"

"Warrants are already being issued. Henry is leading with the FBI, and he's using every trained agent he has, so I understand," she said. "And . . . yep. They're on their way, and they're not bothering to use cars. Oh! They're using RICO and anti-trust charges against

them. And conspiracy and collusion against the lawyers who knew or should have known that the action they took was illegal.”

“Is there any place they can be arraigned that won't be part of this cesspit of legal shenanigans?” he asked.

“I believe so, sir. At least, I know who Henry got the warrants through. You're apt to hear some screams from the Judicial Committee, though,” Melanie said.

“Let them scream. If they scream loud enough, they can join the others in court,” the President said. “Then we'll take a close look at the patents that the USPTO passed, and who supported them. And how. Muriel, how long would it take to get copies of the patents in question, and how they're invalid?”

“What? ALL of them? It would take at least one semi truck to hold them. Or, I could just issue you a phone that would have everything that I have on them,” she said.

“I think the phone would be easier to handle,” the President said, dryly. Muriel passed him a second phone, and took back hers. “Just make a mental connection to it, and you'll find it very helpful. Oh, and it can call anyone you want to talk to. It can even grab your contact list from your current phone, as well as any pictures, etc. It's a very helpful piece of equipment,” she grinned.

“Do you ever get tired of handling stuff like this?” he asked her.

“Well . . . yea. But I'm good at it. After all . . . I do have a vocation,” she said, patting her belly. And the President laughed at the quote from Henry the Fourth part one. Muriel lacked the impressive proportions of Falstaff.



Meet the Author

Craig A. Eddy

I'm 67, retired and proud of it. I live in a science fiction world. When I was 14, I wanted a computer that would do the things the room sized ones could do, but would fit in a briefcase. I was thinking small. What I ended up with a few years later was one that could do those things and fit in my shirt pocket. And it's just gotten better. I've been a CAD operator (18 1/2 years) and a number of other things in my life, and now I write fantasy novels for my own amusement using a computer with no paid software on it. All free. Even the operating system (Linux).

Currently writing Fantasy books that are available as PDF files under Creative Commons License.

Bragging rights:

I have a Bachelor of Arts degree in Philosophy a B.A. in BS